

A portrait of Karen Kwak, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a black, long-sleeved, textured V-neck top over a dark top, and blue jeans. She has several gold necklaces, including one with a cross and another with a heart, and a gold watch on her left wrist. Her arms are crossed.

Karen Kwak

Mastering the

BY SIMON GLICKMAN

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“RIHANNA PUT A FINGER IN MY CHEST, LOOKED ME DEAD IN THE EYE AND SAID, ‘I WANT THAT RECORD.’”

Art of A&R

When Karen Kwak was tapped as EVP/Head of A&R at Warner Records by Co-Chair/CEO Aaron Bay-Schuck, it was shortly after she swore she'd never take another label gig. The A&R hitter began her career at Motown, served at Arista and Island Def Jam and worked at the UMG corporate mothership prior to launching her own KK Consulting. Then Warner came calling, and the opportunity to help shape the department at the revamped Bunny proved irresistible. Kwak's playfully self-deprecating demeanor conceals an extremely diverse skillset—she deals with logistical nuts and bolts and artist whispering with equal aplomb in pursuit of her ideal of the A&R exec as “creative concierge.”

What were the things that kind of made the bells go off for you when you were young?

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, but my parents are Korean immigrants; their music was '50s and '60s pop. In our home, music was important, but in the Korean immigrant parent kind of way, I learned how to play piano. I could play *Für Elise*. My dad had his toys, massive stereos with the biggest speakers—which is ironic, because he said that that's why I ended up in music.

But what really got me into music was the kids in the neighborhood, and a lot of it was about style. My best friend down the street was into rock: Rush, Black Sabbath, Ozzy. I think my first concert was Journey at the Forum. I was *really* young.

We got dropped off! I would never drop my daughter off at a concert like that. At the time it was all about rock radio—**KMET** and **KLOS** were the big stations.

It was the first experience of my life that impacted the way I dressed, my hair—we had bangs and feathered hair, and we clipped feathers *in* our hair. It had to do a lot with friendships. We used to want to go to the record store as an *outing*, and stare at the covers. Later on, I had a friend who introduced me to **Prince**.

What was your neighborhood in L.A.?

I grew up in Culver City, but it didn't have any cachet back then. Years later I moved to New York, and when I came back, some-

istration, and my friends and I were listening to R&B as well as early hip-hop like **Run-DMC**, **Beastie Boys** and **LL Cool J**. I remember going to the **Long Beach Arena** for a rap show. A friend of mine said, "Hey, they're looking for an intern for **Jheri Busby**." I wasn't that familiar with the players yet—I figured I'd get an in for **Lakers** tickets because I thought they meant **Jerry Buss**! But I went in and interviewed and was hired on the spot. That was my first experience, and I learned so much. I answered his phones; I couldn't really type, but I'd memorize everything he told me and type it up later. I did his expenses. I'd be filing and I'd read *everything*. I read contracts. I'd go around distributing memos and got a

PHOTO: JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIRE IMAGE



“Andre Harrell comes in and takes over [Motown]... By now I've learned about all the elements of A&R. Andre was now going to take an L.A. company and make it New York-based. He just gave me a shot, and I moved to New York. I went from intern to VP in four years.”

body said, let's meet in Culver City. And I was like, you're kidding, right? Now it's hip.

Anyway, after Prince I got into new wave and rockabilly, and that was all **KROQ**. And a big part of it was the style. Then at some point it was all about **David Bowie**. We waited outside **Ticketmaster** to get tickets.

I was also very much influenced by R&B music, but I went through the punk/new wave thing, the hairstyle, coloring. We'd buy sweatshirts at the local surplus store and cut them up, paint them. Music, art and style all flowed together.

How did that carry forward into the next period of your life?

I was at USC, majoring in business admin-

istration, and my friends and I were listening to R&B as well as early hip-hop like **Run-DMC**, **Beastie Boys** and **LL Cool J**. I remember going to the **Long Beach Arena** for a rap show. A friend of mine said, "Hey, they're looking for an intern for **Jheri Busby**." I wasn't that familiar with the players yet—I figured I'd get an in for **Lakers** tickets because I thought they meant **Jerry Buss**! But I went in and interviewed and was hired on the spot. That was my first experience, and I learned so much. I answered his phones; I couldn't really type, but I'd memorize everything he told me and type it up later. I did his expenses. I'd be filing and I'd read *everything*. I read contracts. I'd go around distributing memos and got a

I would sit across from a manager of the department, who was an engineer. I was now learning, writing credits, and thinking, OK: Written by, publisher, **BMI**, **ASCAP**, mixed by, mastered by... And at that time we had analog, analog/digital or analog/digital/digital. I'm doing the credits, and I want to

understand what all this means. I remember asking the department manager, and he was not that helpful. So I took a recording/engineering class with **UCLA Extension**. That helped me understand it all.

Motown at the time was **Boyz II Men**, **Michael Bivins**. That was all very new. At the same time we had **Stevie Wonder** and **Diana Ross**. So now I'm reading the credits; I'm familiarizing myself with the writers and producers, the recording process. And then I take on admin too.

I was thinking I should go to business school. I started applying, and then they gave me a promotion and a raise, and I got my own office. So I was like, I'm not going to school.

right in the middle of what he was doing. He had just left **MCA**. My team and I were handling the nuts and bolts.

You made the trains run on time.

Yes. I'm learning everything from when you sign an artist to getting the record out. You have to get mixes finished, get them approved, do the mastering with **Bernie Grundman**.

Throughout this transition, **Clarence Avant** is the Chairman of Motown, and I am *so blessed* to have him in my life. But **George Jackson** comes in as President at the label, which was unexpected. He's a filmmaker; he did *Krush Groove* and other movies. Then **Universal** bought **PolyGram** and laid lots of people off. But because I have the institu-



*Kwak, Andre 3000
and Damon Dash;
with Clarence Avant*

Then **Andre Harrell** comes in and takes over, and I learned so much from him. By now I've learned about all the elements of **A&R**. Andre was now going to take an **L.A.** company and make it **New York**-based. He just gave me a shot, and I moved to **New York**. I went from intern to **VP** in four years.

That's insane.

That never happens. I'm now doing what's called **A&R Operations**, managing the team and doing budgets and departmental stuff, just learning as I go.

I couldn't have asked for a better transition to **New York** than working with Andre. You want to talk about life, music and culture? I was overwhelmed, to just be dropped

tional memory and know where everything is with the roster, I stay on. But then I got a call to interview at **LaFace**.

Talk about a change of scene.

I know what's going on in **Atlanta**—**Dallas Austin**, **L.A. Reid** and **Babyface**. It's a growing hub in music. So I went down and got hired to work with **L.A.** He and I connected. And I was like, "This is still the South." As I'm walking through the airport, they're calling me "Miss Lee," "Miss Kim," and I'm going, *Fuck off, you country bumpkin*. I was going back to **New York** every weekend; as much as I loved the music, I didn't feel connected to the *place*. I wanted to go back to **New York**. **Arista** was our partner,



PHOTO: JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE

*Kwak with
The-Dream,
Rick Ross
and French
Montana*

so I dealt with them a lot and I was going to go for an A&R admin job there. But L.A. said, “Just sit tight.”

So he makes the move and is running Arista, but I’m still not in a creative role. I become his right hand, running the department and managing the A&R team. I was also responsible for all of his music, for presentations and so on. I introduced him to the iPod, because I was like a pack mule going to meetings carrying huge backpacks with two CDs of everything.

L.A.’s sense of presentation is pretty legendary.

He’s showbiz! I can’t tell you how much I learned from working so closely with him. Being his music person is when I really made the connection. This is when I got to take all the knowledge I had and my whole pushy, let’s-get-it-done thing and segue to the creative side, mostly as his right hand. He liked to ask people their opinions, and mine were pure in the sense that I’m not a musician and could say I like it, I don’t like it, this is too loud, whatever. He taught me. He took me everywhere—studios, showcases, artist meetings, corporate meetings. And because I lived in the city and didn’t go home to Jersey or Connecticut or wherever, I could go anywhere at any time.

He clearly saw you as a budding creative exec. When did you start to see yourself that way?

I’m not sure. L.A. and I had a chemistry that worked; we would organize and sequence our presentations the night before they were

due. He would smoke cigars. Island Def Jam is where I really started to help him in that way. It was working with Mariah Carey and her in-house team that was really my transition to creative.

I had worked with Tricky Stewart and his brother, Mark, on an artist named Blu Cantrell at Arista. We reconnected years later, and Mark emailed me an MP3 of a song called “Umbrella,” asking for thoughts. I kinda left it alone for a few days; and my assistant used to take all the music that I had to keep up with and put it on a CD for the weekend. I’m not that talented—I’m just a fan of music and a little bit of a groupie. And it wasn’t until I listened to it outside of the office space that I was, like, *holy shit*. I call Tricky and tell him, “Give me the record.” He asks me for who and I tell him Rihanna. Remember, she’s kinda new. I bet him two Birkin bags it would be big for her. So I go to play it for L.A.

Now, there’s an art to when you play somebody a song, right? If you’ve got drama going on you *cannot hear a record*. Rihanna’s team had the song for a bit, and then I saw her, with the team, and she put a finger in my chest, looked me dead in the eye and said, “I want that record.” Tricky wants to give the record to Mary J. Blige, who’d just had a ginormous chart debut and had all these Grammy nominations. And at the time everybody wants to be in business with Jimmy Iovine. But Rihanna saying she wanted it put me in crazy mode, so I call and call and call, just stalking them. I wore them down, and they said OK. I have no shame in my game at this point.

Then we signed The-Dream and brought in Tricky and Dream as an in-house team, and they were just the gas pump of hits. They were making records for everybody.

It sounds like the classic Motown model in miniature.

Right. And now I’m getting my feet wet in A&R. And where I feel I was really able to help was in identifying A&R executives. I brought in Ray Romulus as an assistant; he’s now one of The Stereotypes. I brought in Bu [Abou Thiam], Akon’s brother, who’s now advising Kanye; he brought in the Jeremih deal. Now things are moving at the label; Justin Bieber gets signed. I’m doing more A&R, still running the department, still being L.A.’s right hand. It was a lot, but it was exciting.



PHOTO: TAYLOR RICHARDS/PATRICK MCMILLAN VIA GETTY

With Carmen Murray, Scooter Braun, Randy Phillips and Steve Rifkind

When did you move back to the West Coast?

I got pregnant, and I went back to Los Angeles to check on my dad and found out he had pancreatic cancer. That's when everything just slowed down, because I had to figure out his treatment plan. I'm traveling back and forth between the coasts. The creative culture was migrating toward the West Coast, so L.A. Reid told me to stay in Los Angeles.

My kid was born, my dad passed and then, when L.A. left the company, Barry Weiss came in. He goes, "I just want you to focus on being creative." And at first I said, "Why? Am I not organized enough?"

I brought in No I.D. on Big Sean's project, and when we were helping Nas in the studio, I came up with the idea of bringing in No I.D. as an executive. He was a gifted producer, culturally significant and highly respected, in addition to being a talent magnet.

This was the era of the "Universal East" configuration, yes?

Yes. I was still under contract, and they were not gonna let me go—that was the Sony-UMG war at that time. But I became very close to Barry. The first meeting I set up for him? It wasn't Kanye, Mariah, The Killers—it was Frank Ocean. Barry's the polar opposite of L.A. in style, and he's pushing me to be the head of A&R in a different kind of way.

Then I went to The Center, UMG corporate, doing A&R. I worked with the Cash Money guys, Slim and Baby, and I was still helping Frank Ocean out, and working with David Foster. It was hard, because all the

labels are their own teams, so it was almost like consulting: one foot in and one foot out. That was about a year. I was just burnt. The politics were heavy and my daughter was just starting school. It was tough.

I decided to take time off, but then the consulting work starts. I flew to Vegas to meet with Britney Spears. We hit it off and just got to work; 13 months later her album was out. I had so much fun working with her; Larry [Rudolph] and Adam [Leber] just trusted me. It was often just the two of us. I was doing it as a consultant to her, and I was then hired as a consultant for Epic and RCA. I did Three Six Zero, working with Tiësto, and worked with Labrinth a bit.

How was the transition to being your own boss?

A lot of calls came in for consultant jobs I didn't take. The A&R person should be the artist's primary relationship, and I'm a team player—I want to be on the team. At first consulting was great because I was decompressing. I was coming off having the big office and the title and the staff and coming off that was an adjustment. But it was the best exercise I could've had, because I did the A&R work *and* the admin work. It was a refresher in an amazing way.

I swore I would never go into another label situation again. Being a consultant on all these different projects was stimulating and I could really focus on passion projects. Best of all, I was able to spend a lot more time with my daughter.



PHOTO: TAYLOR RICHARDS/PATRICK MCMULLAN VIA GETTY

Joey Arbagey, Kwak,
Patti LaBelle, L.A. Reid
and Steve Bartels

Which brings us to your decision to go back in.

The Aaron [Bay-Schuck] thing kinda came out of the blue. I wasn't thinking I was gonna go after this gig. But I reconnected with my attorney, **Aaron Rosenberg**, and before I knew it, I was meeting with Aaron. I'd worked with **Tom Corson** at RCA, and I have so much respect for him. And Aaron is Co-Chairman but is also the A&R/creative guy. I thought, wow, these two are a really solid team. I liked the fact that they're not two Co-Chairs who do the same thing. I thought, if I go back inside, this would be the place.

What was it about the company culture that appealed to you?

It still feels new. They have a young Chairman/CEO, and his approach is different. He and Tom have an incredible work ethic. They're really in the trenches. Just as an example, I accidentally texted a message about having trouble with my printer to Aaron, and he replies with "Oh, reach

out to so-and-so, and my assistant can help you," and I was apologizing for texting him about it and he's laughing, like, "I told you I'd be there if you needed anything." He's extremely smart, he's articulate, relatable—I just really like his style and taste. It's a great leadership dynamic between him and Tom. And the culture is coming together; partnering up with **Steve Carless**, whom I'd worked with at IDJ, made it even more appealing. It doesn't happen overnight, but it's definitely developing.

Can you say a little about the state of A&R at present?

I don't do a lot of research. I'm old school. I meet with artists, go to the studio. I'm hoping it moves in more of a hybrid direction. It feels like a singles business right now, and the deals are *big*. A song gets big on **TikTok** and starts streaming and there's a bidding war, but how many of these have become career artists? You're doing meetings on **Zoom**; there's all this data. It's virtual A&R! Some of the art of A&R has been lost lately, especially with COVID. Look, we don't make stars—we scale them up. You find diamonds in the rough and develop them. Now these kids just get the records going on their own, but what happens next?

I think things are starting to go back to a balance of research and a little bit of the traditional A&R as well. Now these kids are saying, "How do we scale up?"

You've previously talked about this idea of A&R as "creative concierge." Can you elaborate?

Every artist is different and has different needs. You're helping the artist fulfill their creative needs. Some artists need to be connected with songs or producers, some need a sounding board, some need a cheerleader. That's where A&R as a creative concierge comes from. The A&R person is between the artist and the label. There's an art to that, and it's about finding a connection with the artist. ■

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