



Mark Pitts

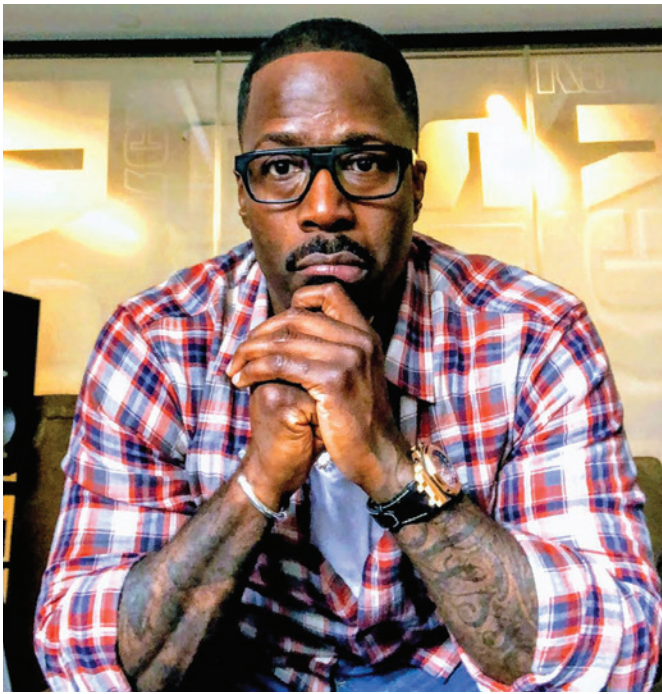
Using the Moment

Mark Pitts, who became **RCA** President early in 2021, has been part of the label's fabric for a decade, heading Urban Music for the company and shepherding an array of hot acts on his own **ByStorm** JV imprint, where he retains the title of CEO. The Brooklyn native was an aspiring artist (as part of the rap group **Three Left**) when he sat down with fellow **Howard** alumnus **Sean Combs**—then head of A&R at **Uptown**—and had a career epiphany, opting to pursue the biz rather than the spotlight. Pitts subsequently worked with artists like **The Notorious B.I.G.**, **Faith Evans**, **TLC**, **Usher**, **Chris Brown**, **Nas**, **J. Cole** and **Miguel** in his capacities as artist manager, producer and label exec (in the latter role he served at **Rising Tide**, **Arista** and **Jive** prior to joining the House of Nipper). He's experienced meteoric success, unthinkable tragedy and enormous challenges, but his outlook remains grounded in gratitude, generosity and possibility. Beyond his considerable acumen and professional experience, Pitts has been instrumental to company culture, serving as mentor to countless younger execs.

Pitts and Usher celebrate at the latter's 2018 birthday bash in Atlanta.

PHOTO: PRINCE WILLIAMS/WIREIMAGE

INTERVIEW BY MICHELLE SANTOSUOSSO



**“I’M AN ARTIST
trapped inside an
executive’s body.”**

How did you segue into management after you began working with Puff?

At first I was an intern, an assistant. Puff and I lived together in Scarsdale while I was trying to find my lane. Around that time he met Big. I was the only one in the crew from Brooklyn, so I wound up running around with Big and working my way into doing the day-to-day stuff for what was at the time Bad Boy Management. We were always together, Biggie and me. When Puff got fired from Uptown and got the new deal with Arista, he put Big on Bad Boy Records; Big was with Bad Boy Management but was previously signed to Uptown. That’s when Big said to me, “You know, you’re doing all this yourself. I’m with you—why don’t you take a shot?” And I was, like, “Ooh, OK, hell yeah!” That was the beginning of Mark Pitts Management, which led to ByStorm.

You had this new management company when Biggie was working on an album that arguably changed hip-hop. What was that experience like when you were in the middle of it—did you guys know what you were building?

It’s so crazy. Big was only alive as an artist for three years. In the midst of that, Puff had his vision. Every day, you’re figuring it out. Everything happening was like, “For real? What? THAT happened?” I really wish I could say I knew what was going on, but we were just *in it*; I didn’t understand how

important it was until afterwards, after he was gone, and we saw the effect he had. We had no idea—I didn’t realize any of that until his funeral. When I was in the limo and we came off that bridge... We had just left the funeral and were going to drive down and make a pass by the block where he lived. The sea of people lined up, that shit right there, was an emotional moment for me; that’s when I was like, “Holy shit,” when I realized, “*This is what you was in.*”

I vividly remember that scene.

We were trying to figure it out. We were making some money. But by the time you start realizing and being purposeful, he’s gone. Right before Biggie died, we were setting up his clothing line, the label with Jr. Mafia. And he wanted to do a restaurant called **Big Poppa**. We were about to do his first tour and had actually signed paperwork the weekend he got killed. He got to a place where he started to make intentional moves, and boom—it’s all gone.

You’ve talked about how Biggie motivated you to step up. What happened next?

I did my first deal with Rising Tide Records, with **Doug Morris**. I had my little production company I started with ByStorm, and my first artist was **Tracy Lee**. He was the last artist Biggie worked with. Lee was with me in L.A. because when we signed the tour deal, I was setting him up to be an opening act.

When Rising Tide became **Universal Records**, I asked to be released because I wanted to work with **L.A. Reid**. I wasn’t getting the attention. I didn’t want to just fish; I wanted to *learn how* to fish. I knew I still had a lot to learn; I wanted the education. Doug Morris—I love him to death—let me go, let me take my ByStorm name, and I did my deal with L.A. Reid. I’d met L.A. through Puff with Usher, who was living with us.

Puff produced Usher’s first album.

Right. And I was the driver, the babysitter, the big brother, security... I was everything; I did it all, definitely paid my dues. I did a deal with L.A. when he still had **LaFace** in Atlanta, and when he left Atlanta to move to New York to take the job with Arista, I got a job with him. On the management side, it was constant blessings: **Queen Pen**, **Shyne**, **Nas** for a little bit, **J. Cole**. But when I got my job with L.A. at Arista, that’s when I really became an A&R, where I really learned how to do that.

And you went on to A&R one of the biggest R&B albums of all time, *Confessions*.

I got on *Confessions* because when I first went to L.A., I had the song “You Remind Me.” I was shopping my artist and it was his song when L.A. first heard it. They were looking for a song for Usher. I sold the song—and that’s what closed my A&R gig with L.A.

You had that success with Usher and later Chris Brown and after that Miguel. These were massive crossover hits. What’s the secret sauce?

Back then what did it was goosebumps. You can’t put it into words; it’s a feeling. It works for me ’cause I’m an artist trapped



PHOTO: JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE

Pitts with Sean Combs, Voletta Wallace and ByStorm co-founder Wayne Barrow

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inside an executive’s body. That feel, going on gut, got me a lot of blessings. Now it’s different—this is the first time in my life I’m using every part of what I’ve learned, every skill. Whether that’s hearing it, seeing it, getting to it faster... I got the work ethic from Puff. Then I worked with L.A. and became a better music guy. And then I worked with Barry [Weiss at Jive] and became a better businessman because he could squeeze the hell out of a dollar.

So now it’s not just hearing a hit; it’s *seeing* it. You’re seeing what’s going on around it, the context. The game’s changed, and you have to adapt to it.

Living with Puff, though, he didn’t go to sleep until 4am, then had to leave at 8. And I had to be up before him. I slept between 4:30am and 7am, the in-between time. It was truly nonstop, but that foundation got me here. I probably couldn’t appreciate those lessons then, but oh my God, I appreciate them now.

You have such a disciplined approach to your work. And I know you’ve had some health issues—did you apply the same mindset to come through those?

Bell’s palsy was probably the best thing that ever happened

to me. God has a sense of humor, and he knows how to get our attention. When I developed palsy, the whole left side of my face was frozen; I couldn’t smile or even blink for six months. I’d always been told I needed more balance in my life. Well, this gave me balance when it shut me all the way down. It also caused me to get into the best shape of my life. My smile was always part of my mojo; that was my thing. To lose *that*, in that way... I got the Nike swoosh smile now; it goes halfway up. But the experience has made me a better communicator.

Shit is gonna happen that you can’t change. It’s not what happens; it’s how you deal with it. I choose to deal with it with a smile in my own way. Even now, if I get too worked up, I get a little feeling in my neck; it locks. It’s like a leash saying “relax,” a reminder. I never used to appreciate an early evening; I always had to be doing something. The discipline I apply to my health is “No man, go to sleep!” At some point, you just can’t take on the world all day and all night. Those hard lessons are the best lessons. The devil, he tried, but he failed.

There is real grace in the way you've handled it. The fact is, when I talk to people in the business and your name comes up, you're universally considered a model and a mentor for a variety of reasons.

My dad told me a long time ago, when I first started getting into the game and trying to make it, that the best way I can help others is to help myself. The way the Internet is, these artists can go from zero to 100 in a few months; they become millionaires, or a new manager is born because they're the homeboy. The problem is, they skip a lot of lessons. And the more I saw that, the more it made me realize it's my duty to give back because there's no one mentoring. I put the onus on us, though, not the

artist—we're not doing the best job on this side.

My thing is, I want to A&R the A&Rs; I want to A&R the next execs. I use the management skills I started with to maneuver that. The more you educate the young artists and execs, the better partners you create. We need to do a better job with the artists.

They're going to know the vibe because they're out there, in the life. But the fundamentals of how to conduct good business are critical.

A new artist or manager should never come into a room and not understand who they're sitting with. Know where the money is coming from, ask the questions, break it all down. I make them think about it.

Even with that, though, you must have honor and be a good business partner. Say what you mean; mean what you say. This is my biggest thing: Have a code. You can move, get your hustle on, but you don't need to *be* hustling. There's a difference. There's nothing wrong with getting your money, but do it with integrity. I'm still in the system because I have integrity. This is why it's a blessing to be in this position right now—the young kids know there's someone in the seat that's *from it*, that comes from the struggles, the ups and downs, being in the hood. Your past doesn't define you, but it prepares you. I've seen so much. So I am trying to mentor and educate. That is for real.

Not to mention your presence in terms of representation. You're not just somebody from the culture; you're the President of RCA Records, a Black man at the head of a major record company. That's a statement in itself for younger people coming up: "I can do that; it is reachable for me." That is so important.

That's one of the biggest things I've realized: I've been in the system a long time and I worked my way up; I've done a lot of things, from management to publishing, and I've always been stand-up with the business. And that's important because it could have gone another way—I did everything in the hood coming up, trying to find my way. The point is, like you said, if I can do it, you can do it.

It's almost like what **Steph Curry** did for kids. He wasn't born with it; he worked on his craft. And it made basketball more inspiring and more attainable to young kids who don't have the natural gifts of what you think a basketball player is supposed to be.



Top: Pitts with Carolyn Williams, John Fleckenstein, Usher and Peter Edge. Bottom: With Edge, Joe Riccitelli, Keith Naftaly, Tunji Balogun and Fleckenstein



Left: Pitts with Miguel and Edge. Right: Pitts, Shawn Holiday, Rob Stringer and DJ Khaled help Usher celebrate his 40th birthday.

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Speaking of team sports, how is your A&R squad?

Absolutely the best A&R team in the game. And I give most of that to Peter Edge. Now that we’re getting more into the rap space, which is my agenda, we need to do our thing with these streams and pick up marketshare. We’ve brought in some amazing additions to accomplish that and it’s starting to show.

How did you switch up your routine when lockdown hit?

I relearned myself. My entire career, I’ve never been around my family every day for five months straight because I’ve traveled constantly. So that was the first thing, family, ‘cause I’m like, “Oh man, I really like y’all; y’all cool!”

I got even more on my workouts because I had the time, and I started drawing again. My 50th birthday was July 4, 2020, during the pandemic. Someone gave me a Marvel birthday card—I’m a Marvel head. One day I was on a Zoom with technical difficulties. I’m sitting at my desk, see the card, pick it up and start drawing it. I’ve been drawing ever since. And I hadn’t drawn in 25 years!

Having the Zoom calls was tough. I’m an animated guy; I use my body to talk. Like with palsy, Zoom forced me to articulate differently to get across. Because it’s all just foreheads, eyes and necks looking at each other!

And with Black Lives Matter, all the stuff that was going on around that time, I was seeing how much was needed. When everything went down with George Floyd, there was this feeling

of wanting that equality, of “It’s our turn.” I was in the middle trying to balance this whole thing. But here’s what I know: You use the moment to conduct the conversation. And there were many conversations where I was tested; I was forced to have conversations that I didn’t even know I had in me. We still got a lot of work to do, and I appreciate the challenges, but I see it moving; it’s going in the right direction. As long as you start seeing the lemonade from all the lemons and take positive action, that’s growth.

From a personal, human standpoint, I improved. I’m constantly working on myself, and there were things I wanted to get better at. I learned a lot about what I need. I learned what I don’t need. I’ve grown a lot.

How do you see the future?

First and foremost, I want to master this role, however long that takes. I love what I do—it’s my dream come true—and I want to make a real mark in the game. I tell Peter all the time, “I’m not going to change; I’m going to grow.” I’m an old A&R but a new type of president. I’m a president, but I move like the mayor.

And like I said, I want to make my mark with the next generation, make these artists better businesspeople. I want that to be my legacy.

I want to break expectations. Everything I’ve been through, everything I’ve learned, the growth I’ve experienced—it’s all prepared me to change the narrative of what you think you know. ■