



# RYAN PRESS

HE'S GOT GAME

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN

# A

true star of the publishing world, **Ryan Press** was upped to President, North America, at **Warner Chappell Music** as this profile was being prepared, adding that august title to his ongoing role as head of A&R. The Philly native began as a manager before landing his first pubco gig—at Warner Chappell, as it happens—in 2009. Among the deals he’s had a hand in are pacts with **Summer Walker, Cardi B, Lizzo, Jhené Aiko, Saweetie, Anderson .Paak, Travis Barker, Greta Van Fleet, LVRN** and **Eardrummers**. One thing that hasn’t changed since Press first got into the game: his hard-core hustle.

**“I REMEMBER WALKING INTO BASELINE STUDIOS, AND ALL OF MY HEROES WERE THERE. IT WAS JAY-Z’S BIRTHDAY. HIP-HOP, WHO STARTED HIP HOP SINCE 1978 WITH GEE ROBERSON AND MANAGED EVERYBODY, WAS THERE. MEMPHIS BLEEK. TATA. LENNY S. DAME DASH. AND I’M LIKE, “HOLY SHIT—I NEVER WANT TO DO ANYTHING ELSE BUT BE IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS.”**

**Tell me something about your childhood.**

I grew up in Philadelphia in a middle-class environment and was exposed to the city and suburbia. I grew up playing sports—basketball in high school and then on a scholarship in college.

**I’m thinking one of your heroes was Dr. J.**

He was and still is Uncle Dr. J, and his wife was another mother figure to me. I was very close with **Cory Erving**, who passed away. He was my age, and his older brother, **J Erving**, was my brother’s age. We spent a lot of time at their house growing up along with his sister and other brother.

**Your dad was a musician**

Yes and still is. That definitely had an impact on my life and love for music.

My brother and I were raised by a single mom, so my experiences with my dad [**Ron Tyson** of **The Temptations**] were often at shows in different cities and tours in the summer. It was pretty tough because she had to raise two boys on her own. She developed a hard exterior to deal with us. But we had fun. And I saw a woman who would do any and everything for her family. She was like a superwoman to me. She’d change the battery in my car, carry cabinets up steps, make sure we never wanted for anything... That had a big impact on me.

**What work did she do?**

She was a social worker—helping women who’d been battered or people suffering from HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, alcoholism... She was always a fixer and a caretaker of others and her family.

**What music did you grow up listening to?**

My mom was a huge R&B fan, oldies, everything—she just loved music. And obviously with my father being who he was, I was exposed to everything **Motown**. My uncle was a heavy record collector too. Music was around me all the time.

The earliest memory I have of seeing the power of music was watching my dad’s group and **The Four Tops**. As much as they were R&B, they were just popular—attracting predominantly white or mixed crowds depending on the city. So I always thought R&B music spoke to everyone from all backgrounds.

**Was your experience of going to shows how you found your way into the music business?**

The music business found *me*. A lot of my friends in the neighborhood produced songs and were super-intrigued by the business. They were also artists in rap or singing groups. My best friend, **Chad Wes**—music was his dream. He had music equipment from an early age. I’d sit in his house and watch him produce tracks when we were only 12 years old. He was so passionate about music. When he asked me to manage him, my focus in the beginning was just to help my best friend achieve his dream.

**How did you know what to do?**

In the beginning I didn’t, but I relied a lot on my instincts that I’d learned from being around my dad’s group growing up. I also dove in and did the research.

**Where did that lead?**

That led to us getting an apartment with a studio. Philly was happening at the time.





*Clockwise from top left: Jon Platt, busbee, Katy Wolaver, Katie Vinten and Press; Press with Saweetie; with Sylvia Rhone*



**“AT THE TIME THERE WERE TWO-WAY PAGERS, AND I ASKED OMILLIO SPARKS IF I COULD HAVE ALL THE CONTACTS IN HIS TWO-WAY, TO GET OUR MUSIC TO OTHER RAPPERS. I BEAMED MYSELF THE CONTACTS FOR THE EAST COAST RAPPERS THAT WERE IN THERE, THE LOX, CAM’RON, MASE, LL COOL J...”**

J Erving and Troy Carter were starting to blow up with their management company, Erving Wonder. You also had Black Friday, the company that managed Eve and Beanie Sigel. You had the whole Jazzy Jeff crew, plus these hubs of neo-soul. The business felt reachable; I knew some of these people, so I thought we could start to make some headway within the city first.

We got a track to Omillio Sparks, from this group Oschino and Sparks. They were part of a rap group called State Property [that also included Freeway] on Roc-A-Fella. Sparks wanted to buy the track. Apparently, Jay-Z, Dame Dash, Kareem “Biggs” Burke—everyone loved it. I remember walking into Baseline Studios, and all of my heroes were there. It was Jay-Z’s birthday. Hip-Hop [Kyambo Joshua], who started Hip Hop Since 1978 with Gee Roberson and managed everybody, was there. Memphis Bleek. Tata. Lenny S. And if I’m not mistaken, Dame Dash. And I’m like, “Holy shit—I never want to do anything else but be in the music business.”

That track changed everything. Sparks quickly became a close friend, and we started creating music. At the time there were two-way pagers and those big silver flip phones; I asked Sparks if I could have all the contacts in his two-way to get our music to other rappers, and then I beamed myself the contacts for the East Coast rappers that were in there—The Lox, Cam’ron, Mase, LL Cool J... you name it.

**What was your management company called?**

Press Conference Management. I had one client; it was Chad, and he and I were also partners and had a production company.

One day I’m sitting in the Roc-A-Fella office. Biggs is running the company. He says, “I heard you’re the one with the music.” Back then the artists would say, “Don’t play any music for the label.” So I’m, like, “Oh shit, should I play the music? But this is my shot.” When I’m running an A&R meeting, I tell the young assistants, “Sometimes you gotta read the room and

LVRN's Sean McNichol and Tunde Balogun, Press, Summer Walker and LVRN's Wallace Joseph and Justice Baiden; WCM's Brandra Ringo and Carianne Marshall, Lizzo, Press and WCM's Marc Wilson



**“THE FIRST DEAL I SIGNED AT WARNER CHAPPELL WAS THE STEREOTYPES, AND THEN PRISCILLA RENEA. SHE AND I QUICKLY BECAME CONNECTED AT THE HIP, AND THAT’S HOW I GAINED A LOT OF RESPECT IN THE PUBLISHING BUSINESS. OUR CAREERS STARTED TO TAKE OFF TOGETHER.”**

know when it’s time to take your shot.”

I pull out my computer and play Biggs, like, 20 songs by **Young Gunz**. And he says, “We got an album done—this is the album. What are we waiting for? We can put the album out. I want to sign you and Chad to a production deal.” He wanted to buy 25 songs for 15 or 20 grand a track—life-changing money. That deal allowed us to quit our jobs and take everything more seriously. We ended up producing 10 of the 14 songs on the Young Gunz album. We had the first single, “No Better Love,” and things just started to take off.

Once my career with Chad started to take off, I felt I had the capacity to do more; I knew my impact could be big. I needed to spread my wings. So I started to look at other people to manage. I managed **Cassidy** with J Erving. Then I started to manage songwriters, starting with **Frankie Storm**, who wrote “Don’t Stop the Music” for **Rihanna** and a couple of **Jay Sean**’s hits. The publishing part came into play when Chad’s career took off and people wanted to sign

him to publishing deals.

**Theo Sedlmayr** was my attorney at the time, and I think it was Theo who introduced me to **Livio Harris** at **Notting Hill**. This was 2006. He said, “I don’t have any representation on the East Coast. Would you be interested in doing A&R as a publisher? We’ll pay you a commission on the deals you bring in.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but it sounded like an opportunity. I was getting exhausted by people calling me “Freeway’s manager”; I just wanted to be **Ryan Press** when I came into the room. I wanted to be **Puff Daddy** or **Berry Gordy**. Livio gave me my first shot and influenced where my career would go from there.

I started to develop a very close relationship with **Juan Madrid** [at **Sony/ATV**]. We immediately became inseparable. While learning the hustle on the Notting Hill side—bring a deal in and get a check—I’m watching Juan and [Sony/ATV’s] **Rich Christina**, learning the creative side. They’re actually working with the people they signed. I didn’t get that at Notting Hill, because I was just a consultant.





Guy Moot, Carianne Marshall, songwriter/artist/producer Belly, Press and manager Wassim “Sal” Slaiby

So I’m in Miami, where Freeway had just performed, and this new artist named **Rick Ross** comes out. I hear, “Every day I’m hustlin’” and this beat is playing, and I’m on the side of the stage losing my mind. I’d never heard a song like that in my life. Ross’s energy onstage is captivating. It was a real moment for me. The next day I’m researching: What is this song? It had just come out in Miami and was starting to blow up. I’m telling Juan, “You need to sign these guys [**The Runners**, who co-wrote and co-produced “Hustlin’].”

I signed **The Runners** to Notting Hill, and that was my first publishing deal. Their manager at the time was **DJ Khaled**, but he’s also a producer. He’d bring Freeway and me to Miami to work on projects. When we finished the **Runners** deal, he’s, like, “I got another deal for you: It’s me.” And he talks about the music he’s going to start working on as an artist. So, I’m, like, “Hell, yeah!” And that was the second deal I did at Notting Hill.

But as **The Runners’** career started to take off, I wanted to work with them the way I saw Juan and Rich working with songwriters. That’s when my brain started to shift to publishing A&R. But I needed to do it at a company where I was actually on staff. I was willing to take the step back financially to take the step forward in my career. It took years, to be honest.

#### So you continued to manage artists?

I continued managing and was basically living at Roc-A-Fella Records—I was on the hunt for how to work inside one of those companies. I was getting traction on the publishing side, so I was intrigued. But I stayed open to the possibilities and kept hustling. Next thing you know, Juan leaves Sony and goes to Warner Chappell. They also wanted to hire a New York person. **Zvi Edelman**,

who by now was my attorney, was working out Juan’s situation, and he and Juan were pitching me. Eventually I got an interview and then the job after being turned down twice: Senior Director of A&R. I jumped right in—signing people, working with the roster, everything.

#### Who were some of the writers you connected with at this point?

I was mostly working with the roster **Chris Hicks** and **Shani Gonzales** built. It was **Bryan-Michael Cox**, **The-Dream**, **J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League**, **Drummer Boy**, **Wynter Gordon**, **Claude Kelly**...

Juan and I wanted to reshape the roster to represent the new era. The first deal I signed there was **The Stereotypes**, and then **Priscilla Renea**. She and I quickly became connected at the hip, and that’s how I gained a lot of respect in the publishing business. Our careers started to take off together.

#### When did you change coasts?

**Dave Johnson** was the chairman, and he asked me to come to his office to meet with who I thought was going to be **Cam’ron**. I go to his office and in walks **Cameron Strang**, not the rapper **Cam’ron**. **Strang** pitches his business to **Dave** for two hours. I really had no idea what was going on. Six months later, **Strang** becomes the chairman. Later on, he comes to me and says, “I did my research on you, and we need you to move to L.A. now.” We go back and forth about my deal. I’m walking on Fifth Avenue, and I’ll never forget, he says, “I’m not negotiating with you anymore. There’s no future for your career in New York. I’ll see you in L.A. We’ll figure out your contract when you get here.” I had that instinct again—this is my shot. Coming from the East Coast, I felt I could out-hustle anybody.

#### What were your projects?

**Priscilla Renea** was taking off; she was one of the most in-demand songwriters. **The Stereotypes** were hot. I signed **Gucci Mane**. I brought **The Runners** to Warner Chappell. They had a couple of **Rihanna** singles, “California King Bed” and “Cheers (Drink to That).” I signed **Ross Golan** and **PARTY-NEXTDOOR**. Juan and I signed **T-Minus**.

#### At what point does Jon Platt come into the picture?

**Cameron** started running the label side, and that’s when they added **Big Jon**. I already

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looked up to him and was inspired by his career. Here was someone who looked like me and was doing legendary things. When he got to Warner Chappell, it was very comfortable and easy to work with him. We’re both Scorpios who got our start as managers of producers—that’s how we both got into publishing. I could relate to and learn from him. I never had a mentor in the business and Jon quickly became that to me.

#### **What did you learn?**

I didn’t think there was a person in the world who worked harder than me. I would go to a showcase, and when I went back to the office at 10 o’clock at night, he was in the office. He motivated me to work even harder. And he knew everything that was happening. I learned just how smart he was and that he didn’t get to where he was by accident. I remember him telling me, “You’ve got to show up for your artists and songwriters—not just in the good times but *every* time. They won’t remember much, but they’ll remember when you weren’t there.”

#### **Jon then leaves and you’re dealing with a new team. Tell me about Guy and Carianne.**

I was Co-Head of A&R with Katie Vinton, and then she decided to leave to start her own business, so it was just me. They were looking to fill Jon’s position—and I’d be lying if I was saying I didn’t go for it, but they ended up choosing Guy, and that was a great decision. Carianne and I were already developing a great relationship, and I’d worked a bit with Guy when I was a manager. When Guy came in as CEO, they offered me President of A&R, which was amazing, and told me, “We’re going to follow your lead. It’s basically on you to build the team, create the culture of A&R, come up with a plan...” Guy’s a legendary A&R himself, and he’s, like, “I’m going to be right next to you, giving you the tools you need to make this successful.” So we hit the ground running.

And it’s been great ever since. Guy is all about the music. He’s a fan first. The respect level is super-high for me. He’s shown me the importance of global hits and worldwide talent. We talk at least four to five times a day, and he’s really been another great mentor for me.

Carianne has been incredible at upping my knowledge on the publishing business outside of A&R. She’s always extremely supportive but also will be tough on me when

needed—helping me to become a more well-rounded leader. She comes from a smaller company and knows what it takes to build something from nothing, and her philosophy and approach have helped me to look at our business through a different lens.

And now, in my newest role as President of Warner Chappell Music, North America, I continue to appreciate their guidance and support.

#### **What were your guiding principles in developing the A&R culture?**

A lot of my management style goes back to my days playing basketball—it’s always been driven by teamwork. I emphasize that we’re all one group, because I think there was an era in publishing when it was very competitive within the companies and people were pitted against each other.

My approach has always been, you sign to Warner Chappell, you don’t sign to a single A&R person; one person leads, obviously, but you should receive services and opportunities from the entire group. I could be the greatest A&R in the world, but if I’m the only person talking to a songwriter, you’re only getting *my* thoughts, *my* vision.

We’re all going to work on Jenna Andrews, for instance. We’re all going to work on Sarah Hudson or Tay Keith. That requires the right group of people. And I’m not one of those people who doesn’t care how you do the job as long as you get the result; it matters to me *how* the job is done.

#### **How has the publishing game changed in the last few years?**

There’s a lot more capital. There are a lot more players. A lot of publishers are just chasing the trends, not actually signing and developing talent early, before the indicator—before a hundred million streams, before the hit—not identifying something new that you believe in and taking a risk and working the shit out of it.

One of the things I’m most proud of is that Warner Chappell has an amazing reputation for working with songwriters, and that’s something I hold close. We’re not the biggest but I feel we are the most creative major—people sign with us because they believe in what we can do for them; we’re able to compete with the other majors because songwriters believe we’re going to make a difference and add value for them across the board. That’s what we wake up and do every day. ■