

Ambrosia Healy

THE COMMUNICATOR

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH LANG

Capitol Music Group EVP, Head of Media Strategy & Relations Ambrosia Healy has only had three “real” jobs in her life—two of them at Capitol Records. Though she quickly developed a reputation as one of the most adept publicists in the business, Healy has grown in her role at the Tower, becoming a crucial member of the company’s inner circle—most recently under chief exec **Michelle Jubelirer**, whom she describes herein as a “powerhouse.” Over the years, in various capacities, she’s worked with Dave Matthews Band, Coldplay, Nine Inch Nails, Katy Perry, Beck, Sam Smith and countless other artists.





Healy is acutely sensitive both to company dynamics and artist sensibilities, and as adept at messaging as anyone in the game. Here she tells her own story, for the first time ever.

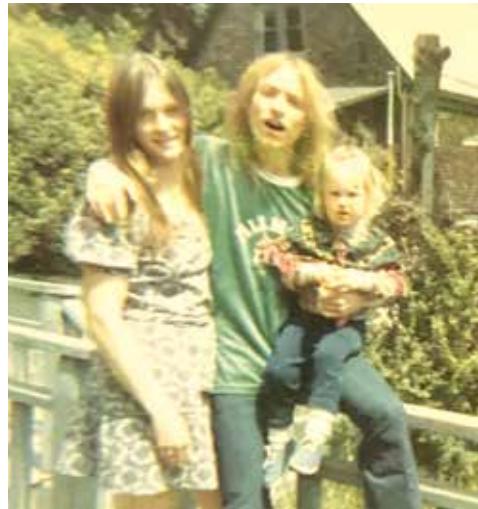
Tell us a little about your background.

I've had such a crazy life. I was born in San Francisco into an extremely unconventional family. My father, Dan Healy, was the sound engineer for The Grateful Dead for almost 30 years. The Dead was my family's life. When I was two, my parents brought me to Altamont; my mom tells the story of having to hold me for 18 hours because there was no place to put me down and no way to get out of there. [Presented by The Rolling Stones, 1969's *Altamont Speedway Free Festival* is remembered for the stabbing death of *Meredith Hunter*. The Grateful Dead were scheduled to perform but declined just before their scheduled appearance due to increasing violence at the venue.]

My family also owned a radio station—which was in our house—and I slept in the record library. From eighth grade until my senior year in high school, one of my household chores was hosting a radio show on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings. I remember the click-clack sound of the AP newswire, which sat right next to my bunk bed. I'd jump out of bed, grab my records, rip the news off the wire and pick out stories based on whether I could pronounce all the words.

So it's safe to say growing up around The Grateful Dead inspired you to work in the industry.

It was definitely my dad's work and being around it all the time that, in retrospect, got into my hard-wiring and gave me a lot of life skills for the music business. But it never occurred to me that you could



The young publicist and her parents

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get a job at a record company—I didn't even know there was such a thing as a publicity department.

My father is one of my great mentors. He always told me, "Figure it out for yourself and don't take any shit." The Grateful Dead was such a big operation that lots of family and friends would stick around and work jobs within the organization. One day, Dad took me aside and said, "This isn't yours. You need to go out into the world and find what your thing is going to be." I get goosebumps when I say that—he wanted me to move beyond the comfort of working in that setting so I could grow.

Because of that, I never actually had any intention of working in the music business;

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Top: With her dad at a Dead show; bottom: with Virgin's Jacqueline Saturn

my intention was to become a school-teacher. After college, I moved to Boulder, Colorado, to get residency to qualify for in-state tuition for what was then the best program for experiential education. At the time, I was working three jobs trying to make Boulder rent. One of my jobs was for the **Fox Theatre**, a venue in Boulder with music seven days a week. I spent most of my time making posters at **Kinko's** and faxing show listings to the local media.

Clearly, at some point, PR overtook teaching.
Well, while I was working there, around 1994, Dave Matthews Band came through Boulder when they were starting out, and I met their manager, [Red Light Management topper] Coran Capshaw. He saw what I'd done locally to promote the show and said, "We really have something special with this band—would you be our publicist and do what you did here in Boulder everywhere else we go?"

That became my hard left turn. I never did go to graduate school. Instead, I became Dave Matthews Band's tour publicist, before they were signed to a major. It was a big deal for me. I was making \$100 a week at the Fox Theatre, but I mustered the courage to ask for \$200 a week to be the band's tour publicist. Not that I really understood what that meant.

I reached out to The Grateful Dead's PR person, **Dennis McNally**, and said, "Dave Matthews Band asked me to be their publicist. What is that, exactly?" So he sat with me in The Grateful Dead's office with this yellow legal pad and we went through all the DMB tour dates, and Dennis gave

me the name and telephone number of every person to call, like **Steve Morse** at *The Boston Globe*, **Tom Moon** at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and so on.

Because of my background, I instinctively understood the mindset of building a following. Going into the job of tour publicist, I did know who did what and how things worked in a touring-band situation. I knew how to talk to artists and journalists, and I understood what information people needed. I just didn't know that's what publicity was.

Dave Matthews Band and Coran Capshaw were incredibly loyal, and I feel very fortunate that they didn't kick me to the curb when the band signed with **RCA**. I worked for them from Colorado, and after that I spent about 18 months in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is the band's hometown.



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What was your next move?

Around 1997 I had the desire to really figure this out as a career. DMB’s lawyer, **Elliot Groffman**, connected me to **Marilyn Laverty** at Shore Fire Media and I moved to New York to work for her. I hadn’t worked anywhere like that before, and I’d never really learned from anybody; I mostly just taught myself. But you can only figure out so much on your own.

Clockwise from top right: At Bonnaroo; with Saturn and erstwhile Motown boss Ethiopia Habtemariam; at Capitol Congress with Greg Marella, Mitra Darab, Ashley Newton, Katy Perry, Steve Barnett, Michelle Jubelirer, managers Bradford Cobb and Ngoc Hong-DelVecchio and Robbie McIntosh

At Shore Fire, I continued working with Dave Matthews Band and worked on the first two *Lilith Fairs* and *The Verve’s Urban Hymns*. I think of that time as my graduate school. Marilyn was a true mentor; she taught me the difference between “doing publicity” and crafting an effective press campaign.

Marty Diamond was another huge person in my career. After about two years at Shore Fire, I went to work for Marty doing my own publicity thing at his agency, **Little Big Man**. I continued with Dave Matthews Band and *Lilith Fair*. I worked on [Verve frontman] **Richard Ashcroft**’s solo album and other British artists such as **David Gray** and **Badly Drawn Boy**.

Coldplay’s first album, *Parachutes*, was just starting to break in the U.K.,



but it hadn’t been released in America yet. In 2000 we all flew over to London for *V Fest*. While we were over there, Marty and **Larry Webman** were meeting with Coldplay to sign them to the agency. **Chris Martin** said to Marty and Larry, “OK, sure, you guys can be my agent—but we’re never coming to America.” Which is wild when you consider how things developed. Anyway, that’s what initially led me to Coldplay.





When did you make the move to L.A.?

In 2001 [Capitol CEO] Andy Slater offered me a chance to move to Los Angeles to run publicity for Capitol Records. That was my first record-company job. It was the era of Coldplay's breakthrough; I hadn't worked with them directly at Little Big Man despite my affiliation with the agency, so Capitol was where I first had the wonderful experience of working with them, as well as other British acts like Kylie Minogue, Lily Allen and Corinne Bailey Rae. I ran publicity at Capitol from 2001 to early 2007. When Capitol and Virgin merged, my job cratered as the whole business cratered. I'd had to give up my indie clients when I went to Capitol, so when the label was made redundant, I went back to being an indie publicist.

What did that look like?

I started building a nice little roster with my own firm, **The Fun Star**, under the umbrella of Red Light Entertainment. I resumed working with Dave Matthews Band, Coldplay, Corinne Bailey Rae and Lily Allen. I also began working with Phish, Nine Inch Nails, Fiona Apple, Alabama Shakes, Azealia Banks, Bastille and Emeli Sandé. The latter two eventually led me to Steve Barnett.

Universal bought EMI and Steve Barnett and Lucian Grainge built **Capitol Music Group**. Under Steve's leadership, I returned to The Tower—the only record company I've ever worked for. This time, though, in 2014, there was the whole new Universal-owned music group, comprising Capitol, Virgin, Astralwerks, Blue Note, Motown, CCMG and Harvest.

What do you recall most vividly about that time?

I freaking loved working with Steve Barnett. Under him, you always knew exactly what the vision was and the direction the company was moving in. He was extremely ambitious and driven, and there was a tremendous amount of trust, which was very special. When I first got there, we were working on **Sam Smith**, and Beck had just released *Morning Phase*. In 2015 Capitol Music Group had the top four Grammy wins; Beck won for Album of the Year and Sam Smith won Best New Artist, Record of the Year and Song of the Year.

A formal moment with Dennis Dennehy

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The company was really happening—it was just high-fives all around. I was very, very fortunate to share in that.

And you had the opportunity to watch Michelle Jubelirer develop as an exec prior to becoming CEO.

By the time I returned to Capitol, Michelle Jubelirer was already a fully formed, powerhouse executive, and I do mean "powerhouse." Don't forget, before Capitol, Michelle was a partner at a very prestigious law firm. She had lots of major artists as clients and was already highly regarded as an artist-first executive. I'm thrilled she is now the chair and CEO, and she has put an amazing leadership team in place. I can't wait to see Capitol reach its full potential as Michelle's vision is fulfilled.

Can you take me through a typical day?

Incoming, constantly. We have an incredible department. I strategize with everyone on all our projects; in some way or another, I'm involved with every artist on the label, whether it's big-picture strategy or rolling up my sleeves and pitching in in the moment. It just depends on what we're trying to accomplish and the needs that arise from that.

I open my computer first thing in the morning while I'm having my coffee and





Clockwise from top left: With Coran Capshaw; with former Virgin GM Ashley Burns at a Dave Matthews Band show; with SNL's Brian Siedlecki

hope I can get through all my emails so I can be proactive on things. I have to block out hours in my day to be proactive in my job, as opposed to constantly responding to the incoming. You just never know; you could be going along with a plan to do one thing, then suddenly you're spending the rest of the day canceling because someone got COVID, someone's flight was rescheduled, someone was arrested... You can have the best of intentions to complete something and end up doing something else instead. That's kind of the job—anything can happen at any time.

As a publicist, you do everything from the ground up. That's the mentality. You start with music bloggers and college newspapers and work your way up to *SNL* and *60 Minutes*. It takes a lot of different skills, and you learn from everything along the way. My hope for the next generation of people wanting to get into this career is



that they have that space and that sense of community to learn the way I did.

The job really has changed a lot too. We now have so much data and get information so quickly. I think of all the faxing I used to do! I think of things like ordering contact sheets so the manager could have a set and we could have a set or copying VHS tapes to messenger out to *Access Hollywood*. Now I send a YouTube link.

At the moment, it's all about TikTok. I've been doing this long enough to know there's always something like that. When I worked with Lily Allen, she was the right artist at the right time to break out of Myspace. With OK Go, we tried for years to get something to connect—then they made the treadmill video [for "Here It Goes Again"] and put it on YouTube. It was just the right content at the right place at the right time.

You still need all the stuff you used to need; you just need more. There's not actually one single thing that can blow the doors off. TikTok is important and a really big piece of the puzzle right now, and there are artists who break out of TikTok, just like there were artists who broke out of Myspace and YouTube, but it usually takes so much more. Yes, we have the data. Yes,

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PHOTO: LESTER COHEN

we have the engagement. You need to have all of that—but how do you then take it off the platform and really go? Again, no one thing is the magic key. The name of the game is: Don’t stop.

You mentioned the next generation—what advice would you give someone starting out in music publicity?

Fall in love.

I love the job because I love the artists. I think being a publicist could be the worst job in the world if you don’t fall in love at least a little bit with all the projects you’re working on; I don’t know that I would want to be a publicist if it weren’t for falling in love with not only the artists and music, but all the people involved in creating it and supporting it. The whole thing. But you really do need to fall in love with the music—the way it makes you feel, the way it makes other people feel. Now more than ever, with all the distractions, you can



Clockwise from top left:
With Michelle Jubelirer and Capitol’s Esther Collins; with Habtemariam, UMG EVP Michele Anthony, UMPG chief Judy Gerson, Jubelirer and Saturn; with Dennehy and a couple of well-earned martinis

get away from what music is about, how it brings people together, that sense of community. I worry sometimes that the next generation won’t have that like we did. When I walk into Madison Square Garden or the Hollywood Bowl to see a show, it’s, “Oh yeah, right! *This* is why I do this! I fucking love this!”

And I always say to the people I work with, “Don’t think that someone is going to do something just because you like it. What are the three reasons *they* should care? So there’s the falling-in-love piece of the job, but we’re *selling* something here. You have to understand the value and importance of the music. You have look at the artist and see what their vision is, grasp what they’re trying to communicate and formulate a compelling way to get that out there.

What do you do for fun? How do you unwind?

I play tennis, swim, ski. But I’m always a publicist; I’m never not doing my job. Like I said, I’m in love with it. I love working with the artists. It never fails that I wake up in the middle of the night with their songs stuck in my head. Ultimately, I think that immersion is the key to the job. ■



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