

EZEKIEL LEWIS

SONGS, SIGNINGS AND "HAPPY CHAOS"

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN AND MILES MARSHALL LEWIS

Epic Records EVP, Head of A&R Ezekiel “Zeke” Lewis been instrumental in Sylvia Rhone’s big successes since his arrival at the label in 2017, working with stars like Future, 21 Savage and Travis Scott as well as signing such acts as R&B phenom GIVEON, breakout rapper BIA, hitmaking writer/producer Southside and Black Eyed Peas, with whom he mapped a new career chapter marked by huge action in the Latin world. Rhone, upon announcing his promotion to EVP in 2018, called him “a creative force of nature.”

The Montgomery, Ala., native broke into the biz as a songwriter, getting in early with the likes of P!nk and Trey Songz before becoming a founding member of influential writer/producer collective The Clutch. His imaginative approach to business, much like his pragmatic oversight of his songwriting career, made him a natural for the world of A&R.



PHOTO: JERRITT CLARK/GETTY IMAGES



LEWIS WITH EPIC RULER SYLVIA RHONE

PHOTO: JERRITT CLARK/GETTY IMAGES FOR EPIC RECORDS

“[SYLVIA RHONE AND I] HAD A GREAT MACRO CONVERSATION ABOUT BUSINESS AND LIFE. THEN WE MET AGAIN, AND SHE SAYS SHE’S LOOKING FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME. THEN WE HAD ANOTHER MEETING. I WASN’T REALLY PLANNING TO LEAVE MY JOB AND I WASN’T ACTIVELY PITCHING MYSELF. IN THAT THIRD MEETING, THE REAL SYLVIA CAME OUT. SHE’S LIKE, “LISTEN, MAN, CAN YOU GO MEET WITH ROB [STRINGER] AT LEAST?”

Tell me about growing up in Montgomery.

I grew up on the west side of Montgomery, the heart of the Civil Rights movement; most of my education was at a school called **St. Jude**, and that campus is where **Dr. King**, **Harry Belafonte** and other marchers from the Selma-to-Montgomery march spent the night. This is the spirit I was around growing up. My neighborhood was rural and in some places impoverished. It was paradoxical: rich in culture, but also in some ways very poor. It was an interesting place.

Did you want to get out?

Absolutely. As I got older, I couldn’t seem to find people to relate to. There was no outlet in Montgomery for growing in the music business. I start writing songs very early in my life—I was in a group called **Human Nature** as a young teenager and wrote the songs; I didn’t even realize at this time that songwriting was a separate career. I thought every artist wrote their songs.

What music influenced you most?

The first songwriter I ever took note of—the first time I said to myself, “What a brilliant writer”—was **Stevie Wonder**. From very early on, I was a big fan of the way he put words and chords together. What most people who don’t study music don’t understand is that his chord progressions are completely unorthodox; they don’t make sense to fundamental-theory musicians. That’s probably because he never studied music formally. His practice of music is different from anybody else’s.

Growing up, I idolized the work of **Babyface** and **L.A. Reid**. I still do. I set a goal early in life to get into the music business and do it through one or both of them. So when I was 17, I moved to Atlanta to get close to them. But even before *that*, at age 15, when I got my learner’s permit, I started sneaking to Atlanta! I was able to do that because my friend **Robert Smith**, who was in a group called **Flavor**, got a deal with **Dallas Austin’s Rowdy Records**. I would tag along to hang out with Dallas and the guys at **DARP Studios**. Those guys would constantly go to showcases too, and I’d go along.

And you were able to be a fly on the wall.

I was nobody! Dallas and the other people would probably be surprised I was around them as a kid. When I moved to Atlanta at 17, I started writing with this group called **Choice**. The group started working with a production outfit called **H.O.P. Productions**, who produced for **Keith Sweat** and the groups **Kut Klose** and **Silk**, which Keith had signed to **Elektra Records**.

Full-circle moment:

Sylvia Rhone was the Chairman of Elektra.

My group, **Human Nature**, was working with H.O.P. One of the guys in that group, **Donald Parks**, was L.A. and Babyface’s midi engineer—that was my first connection to them. The H.O.P. guys suggested I write songs for their projects, and I started working with **Choice**. They recorded an album and got dropped, but L.A. decided to keep **Alecia Moore**, who became **P!nk** in the process of making her first solo project. **Kawan “KP” Prather**, **LaRonda**



Sutton, who ran **HITCO Publishing**, and the late **Shakir Stewart** brought me to L.A. I signed a publishing deal with HITCO, worked with **P!nk** and **Luther Vandross**. I got a record deal as a solo act, even though I didn’t really want to be an artist at this point. **David Foster** heard my voice on my demos when I was pitching songs and offered me a record deal with **143**. I’m young, I’m new in the biz—I can’t say no to David Foster, sorry. So I did a deal, nothing came of it; he sold his label. But we remain friends to this day.

So it was back to writing.

Writer and producer, period. I met a big R&B producer, **Troy Taylor**, and he and I started writing songs together. One of the first things we worked on together was **Whitney Houston’s** Christmas album. He introduced me to a 15-year-old kid, **Tremaine [Neverson]**, who became **Trey Songz**. We started doing his demos in his basement in Teaneck, New Jersey, which got him his deal with **Atlantic**; **Mike Caren** signed him. I was part of most of his albums.

*Left to right:
With rapper G
Herbo; Ready
to hit the gas
with will.i.am
and South
African
artist Tyla*

After those early albums became successful, I started **The Clutch** [with Keri Hilson, Balewa Muhammad, Michael “J.Que” Smith and Candice Clotiel “GG” Nelson.]

How did The Clutch form and how did you work together?

The Clutch marks the beginning of when my mind for *business* really expanded. I had a good career; I was on a Grammy-winning recording [2003’s *Dance With My Father*] with Luther Vandross. I was doing well. But it was so much effort to write songs every day *and* try to get them to the right people. I thought, how can I do better? Around this time, HITCO and **Universal Music Publishing** put together a writing camp, which didn’t happen as frequently then as they do now. They put us together in Miami to write songs for what was then called **Sony Urban**, which was run by KP after he left [Reid and Babyface’s label] **LaFace**. **Ethiopia Habtemariam** at UMPG—whom I met when *she* was working at LaFace—picked some writers from their roster;



Top row, l-r: Pontus Winnberg (*bloodshy and Avant*), Lewis, Britney Spears, Henrik Jonback, Patrick “J. Que” Smith (*The Clutch*), Christian Karlsson (*bloodshy and Avant*) during Britney session; Lewis with Sony Music boss Rob Stringer, Rhone and label EVP/GM Rick Sackheim; bottom row, l-r: *The Clutch*: Balewa Muhammad, Keri Hilson, Lewis, J.Que and Candice Nelson had the sky hooks; Young Zeke brings the cheer to Whitney Houston’s holiday album

HITCO sent some of theirs, including me. The people who ultimately became The Clutch, we were all aware of each other and just gravitated toward each other.

I remember at the end of that trip we were together in a hotel room, discussing it, and I said, “We should brand this when we come together.” I played basketball and I thought of somebody making a shot at the buzzer—a clutch player. That’s how we became The Clutch. So no matter who from the group worked on a particular song, it was *branded* as The Clutch.

A business entity.

Exactly. And through the brand, a lot was accomplished. We went on to do “Icebox” for Omarion with Timbaland, “Like a Boy” for Ciara, “Take Me as I Am” for Mary J. Blige,



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Britney Spears’ “Radar,” “One Less Lonely Girl” for Justin Bieber and a lot more. And we worked on material with Usher, Chris Cornell—all kinds of artists.

And you set up your own publishing venture?

It was called *The Bar*—I set this up with Troy. This was separate from the pub deal I’d signed as a writer. This was to sign other writers.

You began your career around the time file-sharing began to have a devastating impact on the business. What are your thoughts on the shifts that began during that time?

Pop music had an issue overall, because CDs sales were down and you had people file-sharing on Napster and other sites. But when you look at it in a macro way, pop music was less affected because it had Top 40 radio to exploit; you’d still know what was hot in pop.

Where we got lost was urban music, because that wasn’t being worked by the major systems at Top 40 radio; it was being worked at Urban radio. And there was no remuneration for the consumption because people weren’t buying urban CDs like they had been. Urban music was lifestyle music, in the clubs, in the streets. I was listening to stuff on *My Mixtapez* or *DatPiff* back then. You would see the number of streams and you’d know: People love this. I would know coming in: “Yo, this shit is hot.”

You’d go to the suburbs and see kids of all races bumping to hip-hop, but again, there was no sales-tracking system to show how this music was being consumed. We used to have to argue for this; we’d say, “You guys should really give this a shot at Top 40, give it a chance to work” and “You should actually produce CDs for this.” But the labels weren’t hearing it because they didn’t see the remuneration for the music. Even though we could tell them, “In the culture and the lifestyle, this is hot; people like it. I’m telling you, your kids like it.”

But, like I said, there was no way to track how was it doing commercially—until we had streaming services. Then the labels started to see that this music was actually being streamed a lot. It changed the psychology around everything when they realized urban music was as valuable as, if not more valuable than, other genres.

So at what point do you pivot to being an executive?

A few years later, when *The Clutch* is hot, Mike Caren, who’s been bringing me into sessions, is the first person to say to me, “You could be a great executive. You should consult for us.” I love a challenge and I’m always sniffing the air to find out what else I can do. I started con-

Lewis, then at Motown, celebrates Lil Yachty with Quality Control’s Coach K and Pee, Yachty, Troy Carter, iHeart-Media’s Doc Wynter, Capitol Music Group’s then-chief Steve Barnett, Capitol promo domo Greg Marella, Motown ruler Ethiopia Habtemariam and Capitol SVP Urban Promo Azim Rashid.



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Clockwise from left: Lewis and Rhone with superstar Mariah Carey; with Alicia Keys; with Rhone, Sackheim and DJ Khaled as the latter's star was added to Hollywood's Walk of Fame; Shading themselves from the blinding glow of Future's success at Soho House Miami Beach are (l-r) Rhone, Future, RIAA COO Michele Ballantyne, Lewis and Sackheim.

sulting but didn't take it 100% seriously, at first, because my bread and butter came from my songwriting and my publishing business. But I got my feet wet.

Then my old friend Ethiopia, who'd already played a significant role in my career, tells me she is going to have an opportunity to restart **Motown**. Another full-circle moment: Motown had previously been run by Sylvia Rhone and then folded into **Def Jam** in the group of East Coast UMG labels under **Barry Weiss**. So Barry hired Ethiopia to run the new Motown, which was now a little boutique label. I was hired as VP of A&R; it was a small staff. The first artist we worked was **Ne-Yo**, who had been on Def Jam. The East Coast labels thing didn't really work, and we were rolled into **Capitol Music Group**. Then we signed **BJ The Chicago Kid**, who got several Grammy nominations, **Kevin Ross**, **Zaytoven**, **Rich Homie Quan**. Ethiopia did the **Quality Control** deal, but they hadn't really gotten hot yet. Eventually I was promoted to SVP. I left at the end of 2017 and went to Epic.

How did that happen?

I wasn't planning to leave Motown. Obviously, I knew Sylvia from when I was a songwriter; I met with her because I heard she was looking for senior staff. I wasn't *not* going to meet with her—it's Sylvia! We had a great macro conversation about business and life. Then we met again, and she says she's looking for someone like me. Then we had *another* meeting. I wasn't really planning to leave my job and I wasn't actively pitching myself. In that third meeting, the real Sylvia came out. She's like, "Listen, man, can you go meet with **Rob [Stringer]** at least?" I had a good meeting with Rob in New York, and they made me an offer I thought I shouldn't refuse.

What did you see as the opportunity there, and how has the job changed you?

I saw the clear gap in senior-level A&R after L.A.'s departure, so I thought I'd accept that challenge to build something at a bigger company.

Sylvia Rhone has polished me to the point where, as an executive, I'm ready for anything. I feel like there's no job I couldn't handle at this point.

What is it about her leadership that has made you feel that way?

She's very passionate and energetic; she keeps you on your toes. It's a happy chaos at all times, so you're forced to stay on top of things and pivot on a dime. She's challenged us to be nimble, flexible and sharp. It's been an absolute blessing to be challenged as I have.

Besides oversight of the overall A&R team and working with artists like Future and 21 Savage, there have been great artist development stories like GIVEON. We brought G Herbo in and had success with him, including his biggest record, *PTSD*. We've had success with Tyla Yaweh; we've got our first couple of hits from BIA, a big new female breakout, including a double-platinum single. DDG caught his first hit. I signed Black Eyed Peas and put out "RITMO (Bad Boys for Life)," which was the biggest Latin song of 2020; we've had 5b+ streams worldwide on the project, and a new single with Shakira and David Guetta, multiple hits worldwide.

Who else from the team would you like to shout out?

Rick Sackheim, he and Sylvia are my partners on this, of course. Jennifer Goicoechea, Randi Razzano, Jermaine Pegues, Tyshaun Johnson and Patrick Afeku from my team.

What A&R skills are most valued today?

That depends who you ask, but I would say what is most valuable, always and forever, will be instincts and record-making. Any person on the planet who decides to pick up a computer can find data. And data is important, but that wouldn't be the primary skill I'd note because, again, anybody can do that. If you decide tomorrow that you want to be in analytics, you can pick up a computer and do the work to do that. I don't think that makes you special; I just think it means you made a decision to do that. Having musical instincts, artistic instincts—those are the things that are truly valuable.

Would you say that artists seeking record deals now need to have already started their careers on SoundCloud or YouTube and generated huge social-media followings?

Well, if you play basketball, you'd much rather have a layup with nobody in front of you than a layup with Shaquille O'Neal in front of you. But at Epic Records, we actually buck that trend; we signed GIVEON with no analytics and no social-media following. We also signed [U.K. breakout] Mimi Webb with no analytics and no social following. She got a deal when she was not hot—we got hot together. She's already a star in the U.K.

I'll give you another example: We were able to identify this JNR Choi record, "To the Moon," early through analytics. But we would have never signed him just because he's got this song. We loved the song, and the song is a global hit. That's wonderful. But there are still layers to that; there's something under the hood there. There is more than a single to this guy. So I wouldn't say you need to have already started your career on SoundCloud or YouTube and generate huge social-media followings, but if you do happen to be a great artist who has a song that's buzzing—I'm not mad at you for that. But I wouldn't say you *need* to.

You've been working in L.A. and spending weekends in Atlanta. How are you achieving work-life balance?

I am *not* achieving work-life balance. I'm horrible at work-life balance, so I'm not the poster child for that. Most people who do this work successfully, do they have a great work-life balance? No! Let's be honest. ■

Top: With Epic breakout GIVEON, manager Simon Gebrelul and Sackheim; bottom: With pal Courtney Stewart, manager and head of Right Hand Music Group

