

Sony Music Publishing SVP, creative Ian Holder is a crucial player in pubco chief Jon Platt's world, though Holder served at the company for some time before his boss' arrival. In his current post, he plays a key role in developing A&R and is spearheading the pubbery's growth in the creative hotbed of Atlanta. His signings include breakout rapper Jack Harlow, as well as Moneybagg Yo, Lil Tjay and Lil Durk; before that he served at BMI, where he was director of writer & publisher relations.

As he conveys in the following discussion, he considers the cultivation of trust and empathy to be paramount in his work with writers and colleagues.



RAIN

HOLDER

ALL SIDES OF THE TABLE

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN



PHOTO: LEIGH GERMAY



“Writers have a connection with Jon [Platt]. He’s accessible to him. He takes all the calls that he can, no matter where you are in your career, which is admirable. That sets a tone.”

Jon Platt, Ethiopia Habtemariam, Walter Jones and Holder; below: with Jack Harlow

I thought I would start by asking you about the present environment at Sony Publishing, working for Jon and the creative culture that has evolved there.

Since Jon has been here, a tone was set in terms of the culture that we wanted to build. Jon leads by example, by showing, first and foremost, the importance of our relationships with the songwriting community. Writers have a connection with Jon. He’s accessible to them. He takes all the calls that he can, no matter where you are in your career, which is admirable. That sets a tone.

We’re thinking creative-first; songwriters are always at the forefront of every move, every conversation. We work hard to make sure our interests are always aligned. Jon speaks the same language. He’s a fan of all different types of music, but within the hip-hop and R&B community, he’s *cemented*. So, for me, it’s about seeing someone who looks like me, who came through the same ranks and over similar paths. He’s a combination of high energy, foresight and class—all while putting songwriters first at his level. Again, that sets a tone for the culture that we wanted to build.

Let’s talk about the signing process and what you look for when you’re looking at a writer. What are your own criteria?

It’s the individual first. It’s about spending the time to understand how they’ve gotten to where they’re at and letting them tell you where they want to go. Obviously, the music gets you to the table. But what separates the ones who can take it to that higher level? When I meet an artist or songwriter who is set on what their vision is and you see their persistence, how they’ve been able to manage up to that point, what their goals are—

I’m inspired when people can make magic with so little. I resonate with that.

Other songwriters, notably Jack Harlow, have been on the record about your tendency to be there personally for them.

Throughout my journey, I’ve understood being on different sides of the table. Initially, I went to trade school for mixing and engineering. I tried to start a label. I’ve tasted trying the artist route. I’ve been an assistant. I’ve been a manager. I’ve been at a PRO. And now a music publisher. I’m fortunate to have an understanding of different experiences. I’d like to think I get it.

Most prolific songwriters are truly empa-





Clockwise from top: With Jamin Whatley, DJ Bandz, Lil Durk and Jon Platt; with BMI CEO Mike O'Neill at the 2022 R&B/Hop-Hop Awards; with writer/producer Lil Ju; with manager Kenny Hamilton, SMP songwriter Camper and SMP songwriter/Roc Nation artist DIXSON; with Sonny Digital and manager Rico Brooks (in red) at a BMI holiday dinner



thetic. How they can interpret their surroundings and apply their spin fascinates me. True songwriters rarely make it about themselves and are always looking for ways to stretch their abilities. I guess you can say I've tried to model myself by that way of thinking. I've just found a different release for that energy. I pour that energy into the songwriters themselves and the team I work with. When working closely with people, I'm always thinking of what value I can bring to the equation. I strive to evolve in everything I'm part of. In a sense, that's my artistry—that's how I'm able to infuse *my* creativity into what I do.

There tend to be a lot of writers on each song now. Do you see that continuing, especially as people are working more remotely, or do you see a trend in the other direction?

If anything, I think it's continuing. I think we've been in a very collaborative space in the last several years and it's only increased. Certain artists want a community feel as part of their process, and some creators work best in those scenarios. I have conversations with songwriters who've never been open to working with other producers or

songwriters, either because they don't want to have to fight for their ideas or because of the business aspect of having to carve up splits and shares. But I think it's the world we live in and it's where music is headed; creating the best product is what matters. Having that type of collaboration among songwriters is only going to push everybody to be the best versions of themselves. Songwriters' peers are their biggest advocates. I always push writers to be involved and to be active with as many people as possible. You never know what you'll pick up from working with another writer that you can add to your process.

Can you say a bit about the larger publishing landscape in terms of the marketplace, the cost of deals and the preponderance of catalog sales?

Five or 10 years ago, publishing was considered the non-sexy part of the business. Now there's more curiosity. Obviously, we know where it's going in terms of the splashy moves that have been made with catalog acquisitions and the prices of those deals. But I hope the ultimate effect from this is greater awareness of where the songwriter

With Lil Skies
and Stokey
Cannady

lies in all this. With rate changes and those sorts of issues, I'm hoping this sheds light on the importance of making changes that ultimately can affect the lives of songwriters. Because as the business continues to grow and tech companies are continuously finding different ways to source music and catalogs, we have to make sure songwriters are able to see the benefit of that as well.

Can you take me through your early life, where you grew up and when music first was important to you?

I was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Long Island. My parents immigrated here in the '70s from Guyana. So, my older sister and I are first generation. I remember music and sports being an important fixture in my household early. My first experience with music was playing viola in the school orchestra. My sister was into Top 40 pop. My mom was into soca, calypso, reggae. My dad was into soft rock and jazz. I wasn't a fan of hip-hop until the early '90s because I felt it didn't have enough melody.

Do you remember the first time you discovered music of any genre that electrified you?

Yeah, it was probably hip-hop—watching Video Music Box at a friend's house. It piqued my curiosity, and I started to dive into that aspect of culture. It became who I was. But the different musical interests helped shaped my thoughts, even to this day, and how I respond to that first note of a song.

I remember being the baby of the family, riding all the way in the back. We were driving with my older cousins in our Subaru station wagon. And one of my cousins popped in a Pharcyde cassette. It just resonated. Once there started to be more melody in hip-hop, it started to draw me in. Even to this day, I'm a sucker for melody. It makes my heart smile thinking about those days.

Before you had your first gig, where did you see your career? Did you envision something in music early on or did that happen by happenstance?

Early on, probably before college, I knew I wanted to work in either sports or music. First I failed at sports. I went to Christopher Newport University in Virginia for basketball, and I played at Nassau Community College in Long Island. Junior year, I changed my major two or three times; I wasn't inspired. I knew the only things that could inspire me



were sports and music. Toward the end of my junior year, a friend and I decided to start a record label. We didn't know anything about *anything*. We didn't have any relationships. We just wanted to be the next Roc-A-Fella Records. I decided to go back to junior college; at the same time, I enrolled at the Institute of Audio Research to learn engineering and get the basics of how to communicate in the studio. If I was going to do this, I needed to take it seriously and create a foundation. Also, I knew at the end of that nine-month program, they helped you get an internship. I remember they had five places for me to meet. Three of them were studios; the other two Zomba and Epic. My first meeting was with Epic, and I remember walking into that building, I had never been in a record label before, and coming up the elevator, you hear this noise, noise pollution, almost. As soon as the elevator doors opened, it was music from here, music from here, music from over there, posters everywhere, people in

Left to right:
With Ronny J at
the 2019 BMI
R&B Hip-Hop
Awards; with
Victor Victor's
Steven Victor
and Suave
House founder
Tony Draper



“Most prolific songwriters are truly empathetic. How they can interpret their surroundings and apply their spin fascinates me.”

jeans. And there was this energy. I’ve been hooked ever since.

Who did you meet there?

I met Amanda Rosamilia [now Simone] and Dino Delvaille in A&R operations. I remember convincing Amanda not only to hire me but to let me start *that day*. She was supposed to make me wait until the semester started because I was supposed to be getting credits for it. From that point on, I interned for 11 straight months until they created an assistant role for me.

Did you see a place for yourself at the label?

Did you immediately want to be in A&R?
I didn’t see a path for me because at that time interning at a label was different than it is now. You didn’t get paid, and a department could have about seven interns and everybody’s fighting for the same job that may not even open up. But I knew I wanted to be in A&R. If anything, I thought it was gonna be at a label.

How did the jump to BMI come about?

I was a coordinator at the time, and Leotis Clyburn, who used to be a publisher at EMI, used to take meetings at Sony. He saw my energy and how I work. He told me, “I think BMI is about to hire somebody; they need to at least take a meeting with you.” And they did. We had a month or two of back-and-forth meetings, and they were in the final stages of picking their candidate

and they ended up choosing me.

Leotis paid attention to everybody, top to bottom. I didn’t have a lot of obvious mentors coming up in the business, and a lot of my trajectory was trial and error. But I’d be remiss not to mention the times when I did have somebody speak up for me.

Tell me about the experience at BMI.

The biggest takeaway was that it’s what you make of it. You can do a job that’s assigned to you, or you can figure out how to make it your own, to evolve and learn. If it weren’t for BMI, I wouldn’t have as many feathers in my cap. I helped create a social-media awards platform there that they use to this day, the BMI Social Star Award. I would never have been able to do that at a record label. I wouldn’t have learned the true definition of what it means to be songwriter-first, because at BMI you can work with writers at the start of their career and be an advocate. That’s the mentality I take into it. Writers feel the genuineness and empathy I put into the work that I do.

It was after your tenure there you returned to the Sony system, but on the publishing side, yes?

Correct. Danny Strick called me at BMI. My first thought was, “Why is he calling me? Maybe he misdialed.” Then he emailed me and asked, “Would you be open to having a discussion? No pressure.” I said I was, and it quickly developed into what it is



Top: With manager Paul Williams and Landstrip Chip, 2019; bottom: with Motown's Courtney Lowery and CCMG's Phil Thornton

now. Danny and Rich Christina are the ones who brought me back to Sony.

And it was still Marty [Bandier]'s world. That was the world he made, and that culture was miles away from what Jon has cultivated. How did you find your place there?

My experience at BMI allowed me to hit the ground running. I had a level of knowledge that allowed me to jump on things quickly and not be afraid to institute ideas. Having been at BMI, and also having been an assistant, I understood that you need to know everybody on the floor, to know who does what. When I got to Sony Publishing, I was able to be confident about the things I wanted to do and figured out which people I needed to talk to, to get things moving quickly. There were still things I needed to learn in terms of terminology, structure and understanding the depths of the publishing deals. But as far as working with creatives—how to put them in positions that could be beneficial for them, even if they didn't see it, and how to communicate that to them—was something I understood.

After rising to your current post and working closely with Jon, what do you consider your signal accomplishments?

When Jon came, it was clear that we

needed to rebuild our roster. There was an understanding that we weren't as tapped in with the next generation of artists that were coming both in the pop side and hip-hop/R&B side. But Jon came in with direction. That helped me to streamline my efforts. Having insight to his mindset changed things for me professionally—and for us as a team. Jon took the leash off me and let me go. He let me bump my head from time to time, but he trusted me to make the calls that needed to be made. He always says, "A&R begins and ends with trust." If you don't have trust in A&R, you don't have much.

Let's talk a little about your philanthropic work. What is A.R.T.S.?

A.R.T.S. stood for Artistic Reality Through Search, and it was a pilot program that I did in 2011 at a school called Facing History. My friend Michael Muse worked with Barack Obama on fundraising and also helped mayor Bill de Blasio. He knew that giving back was a goal for me and initially pushed me to do get involved with this program. The idea was to teach high school students about different career paths that are available in the music business, and to help them find the professional path that was best for them. I started with that pilot program; once the pandemic hit, the Department of Youth & Community Development in New York City reached out to Will Skalmoski, who works here at Sony, and me. We did Zoom courses over the year with high school students. Every class would focus on a certain aspect of the business.

Insofar as there is downtime, what do you like to do? How do you wind down? What are your hobbies?

I still play sports when I can to stay in shape. But my downtime is mostly about family. My wife and I got married over the pandemic. I also have a son who's a senior in high school and demands a lot of my awareness to make sure he's doing the right things. He's preparing for college next year; he wants to do psychology. He doesn't know half of the people I work with, nor does he care, which I kind of love. He didn't know who Lil Durk was. He just started learning about Jack Harlow.

I travel a lot, so I have to be intentional about making sure enough time is carved out. But it's about finding joy in the experiences we have together. ■