

JACQUELINE SATURN VIRGIN'S SWISS-ARMY WOMAN

Interview by Samantha Hissong

Few executives embody the phrase “Do it yourself” like **Jacqueline Saturn**. When streaming began to snowball in 2015, so did the popularity of the independent distributor. For the first time, streaming was generating more revenue than physical sales and digital downloads, and artists were developing a more direct relationship with their fans than ever before.

Meanwhile, **Universal Music Group** ruler Sir **Lucian Grainge** and **Steve Barnett**, **Capitol Music Group**'s topper at the time, made the call to relocate CMG's distribution arm to the West Coast, empowering **Caroline**, its independent-services division, which now operates as **Virgin Label & Artist Services**. It became part of the newly formed **Virgin Music Group** in September 2022.

In deciding who should help run it, Barnett knew precisely whom to call; it was the same innate leader he'd tapped when relaunching indie darling **Harvest Records** in 2013 and the same promotion machine he'd spent nine years with at **Epic Records**, where he'd witnessed her break **Oasis** in the U.S. and push **Incubus'** “Megalomaniac” and **Modest Mouse's** “Float On” up the Alternative radio chart.

Thus, in 2015 Saturn was named GM of Caroline, in which capacity she doubled the company's marketshare, scoring 14 platinum and 17 gold certifications, as well as #1 debuts from **Migos**, **XXXTENTACION** and **NF** and splashy bows for **Lil Baby**, **Trippie Redd**, **6ix9ine** and **Huncho Jack**.

She became president of Caroline in 2018 and president of the reconstituted Virgin in 2021. To this day, Saturn is the first executive in the office and the last one backstage after a concert.





Saturn with
Steve Barnett

What was your upbringing like?

My parents were super-liberal and really into the arts. My mom had her own American-handcraft gallery; she'd sell things like hand-made ceramics, jewelry and woodwork by artisans from the South and East Coast. We'd drive a lot to pick up these pieces, and we always had music playing, whether it was The Carpenters, Cat Stevens or Helen Reddy. I remember my mom playing "I Am Woman" over and over.

So you were surrounded by music early on?

I'm from Nashville, and when you grow up in Nashville, music is just in your blood. As a kid, I'd go up to the attic and listen to Sunday-night music shows on a clock radio. I loved learning the lyrics. In high school, I'd go to the *Exit/In*. I got a fake ID but not to drink; I just wanted to see the bands. I

remember getting the Sunday paper to read the charts—I just couldn't wait to read those charts. Music really was my whole world.

You didn't go to college for music, though.

I majored in political science. I always thought I'd go to law school because my dad was a lawyer. I was on the concert committee in student government, so I was involved in music in that sense, but I was also trying to take advantage of everything college had to offer.

So how did you get your foot in the music industry's door?

I got home the summer after graduating, and it was such a weird feeling. Nashville was not cool like it is now. I had to get out of there. I was inspired by people who lived in New York, but my parents wouldn't let me go without a job lined up. So I got a job as a paralegal out there while I studied for the LSATs. It was awful. Eventually, I was, like, "What am I passionate about, and why am I not doing that? This is not me. I need to find myself."

That's when you start pounding the pavement, looking in the want ads and staying up every night studying people's names. I took this "Business of Music" class at night at the *New School*. They'd have speakers come in—A&Rs, business managers, talent managers, people in promotion. I finally knew where I belonged. But it was so hard to get a job. You really had to know someone. Miraculously, this family friend who lived in New York who used to stay at our house, where she'd write songs on our piano, called and said, "There's this label looking for a receptionist." I *had* to get an interview, and I did. That was *Savage Records*.

You weren't there long, though, right? How did you make your way to Epic?

That job only lasted two years because *Savage* went belly-up. But I'd gotten to know [label Co-President] Frank DiLeo—I'd take his messages and get him coffee. He'd seen me schmoozing people at the front desk. I was friendly. When the label folded, he said, "You need to do promotion." I'd been helping out in the sales department, but he just insisted, "No, you don't want to do that. Trust me. I know what you need to do." He wanted to

"WARNER CALLED AND SAID THEY WANTED TO BRING ME ON, SO THEY FLEW ME OUT. SOMEONE FROM EPIC BROKE INTO MY HOTEL ROOM AND COVERED THE WALLS WITH PEARL JAM AND OASIS POSTERS. THEY LEFT A BOOMBOX WITH A NOTE THAT SAID, 'PRESS PLAY.' IT HAD ALL THESE GREAT SONGS BY EPIC ARTISTS ON IT, AND THEY BEGGED ME TO STAY."

help me get some interviews.

I interviewed with [promo execs] **Joe Riccitelli**, **Johnny Barbis**... all these people, but I couldn't get those jobs. Sometimes I was great for a job but was told I didn't have enough experience. Sometimes I was told I had *too much* experience. It was a hamster wheel. I must've interviewed at Epic Records 100 times. I finally got a job there working for **Harvey Leeds** as an assistant in the rock department.

Did you have much in the way of female guidance?

No. But I had met [Epic President] **Polly Anthony**, whom I definitely looked up to. I was actually scared of her, but I knew I needed to get close to her. I was always trying to figure out how to get her to say hello to me.

I ultimately learned a ton about leading by example from Polly. A lot of times, she was the first one in the office. And Polly went to the shows. Nowadays, people go for a couple of songs and leave. That was not her. That's how I got to be how I am. My entrance isn't quiet; neither is my exit. Even before I worked for her, when we were at a venue, I'd want that glance, that acknowledgement. She'd say, "Meet me for a drink before the show." She'd invite the quote/unquote cool kids from different departments. It taught me about bringing everyone in. That was her way of mentoring.

I wanted to be like her. I was in awe. My parents came to the office one time, and they wanted to meet Polly because I talked about her quite a bit. And she made a point to be around. I remember her whisking into my office. She could not have been lovelier, and my parents were blown away. She could be tough but also so warm. She taught me that, as an executive, there can be different sides of you, and that was okay.

What about Harvey?

Harvey told me, "Just do your job well; just be great at what you do." I was answering the phones, trying to do more, helping out wherever help was needed. Harvey had this poster behind his desk that said, "What happens when you don't promote? Nothing."

So you threw yourself into your work, determined to climb the ladder.

When you got hired as an assistant, they'd say you had to work the job for two years. Six months into my job [VP of Promotion]

*Top to bottom:
With Republic
co-bosses Monte
and Avery
Lipman at the
City of Hope's
Spirit of Life
gala, 2022; with
erstwhile Motown
boss Ethiopia
Habtemariam;
with Capitol chief
Michelle Jubelirer*



PHOTO: LESTER COHEN





PHOTO: LESTER COHEN



Clockwise from top left: Milo Stokes, KB, Kevin Lee (Coach K), Trippie Redd, Elliot Grainge, Saturn, Matt Sawin, Barnett and Rocket Da Goon; with Glenn Mendlinger; with UMPG ruler Jody Gerson and UMG GM/EVP, Commercial, Content & Strategy Celine Joshua; with Barnett and former Harvest/Caroline exec Piero Giramonti; with Sawin and UMG Chief Creative Officer Dave Rocco; with rock legend Ozzy Osbourne

Stu Bergen was looking to hire a number two. I just started listening to every song, going to anything they'd invite me to and working late. The job was perfect for me, but I hadn't paid my dues, so they didn't want to give it to me. And I thought, "Can't rules change?!" I tried so hard. I sent Stu a bowling pin with the words "I'll knock 'em dead for you" scribbled across it. And they gave me the job. I couldn't believe it. I still think that was one of the biggest coups of my career.

Didn't Warner try to poach you at some point? I was loving my job, but I really wanted to go to L.A. Warner called and said they wanted to bring me on, so they flew me out. Someone from Epic broke into my hotel room and covered the walls with Pearl Jam and Oasis posters. They left a boombox with a note that said, "Press play." It had all these great songs by Epic artists on it, and they begged me to stay. They made me a bigger offer and let me jump right from Alternative manager to senior director.

Alternative music was red-hot for most of your tenure at Epic. I have this memory of working Incubus' "Pardon Me." It was on the cusp of not making it, but we knew it was the one. I remember

being on the phone in the car with [KROQ PD] Kevin Weatherly and having to pull over to the side of the road. I just needed two more weeks. And then it exploded and changed the trajectory of their career; it was their first hit.

You were at Epic for 19 years. Why did you leave?

I was ready for a change. I'd been doing promotion for a long time, and I'd always had a desire to run a company.

Steve Barnett had been at Columbia for a while. When he decided to leave Sony altogether, there was this big party at a Mexican restaurant. We were having fun, and we were all really sad that he was going. At the end, someone went, "Steve, take me with you!" And he goes, "You're not going with me, but she is." He later called and said, "I have an opportunity for you." Steve's the best salesperson on the planet. He had me meet with Lucian, who had this incredible vision. I couldn't not go.

So you went from promoting records to running Harvest as GM.

Steve made the transition so much easier than it might have been; he reminded me that this was an opportunity to connect with everyone I knew. I was already friends with managers, promoters and agents. I was like, "Oh, yeah,

“THE INDUSTRY CHANGES ALL THE TIME. NEW PLATFORMS POP UP CONSTANTLY. YOU CAN’T MISS A SINGLE PLACE WHERE THERE MIGHT BE AN AUDIENCE.”

that’s all I have to do. I’m good at this.” I learned so much from those relationships. And, really, the entire job is promotion—it’s about promoting artists, promoting labels, promoting my team and my vision. It was an incredible experience. And it was at Harvest where I learned about distribution.

Even before you were a distributor, you were drawn to hands-on artists with clear visions, like Oasis and Pearl Jam.

Working with Oasis was one of the most exciting times in music, let alone my career. This was during the time of the [second] British Invasion, which was a wild ride, to say the least. I was lucky enough to continue my relationship with Noel Gallagher when we put out his solo music through Caroline. Working with Pearl Jam [Eddie Vedder, Stone Gossard, Jeff Ament, Mike McCready and Matt Cameron] also taught me a lot. I remember having a one-on-one meeting with Eddie where he played me the music for what I believe was *Yield*. He gave me all the CD refs to take home and listen to. I didn’t sleep a wink that night—I couldn’t believe it. This experience taught me the value of

putting in the time and developing honest relationships with artists. At the end of the day, while we can all be a bit starstruck at times—all these amazing artists are just people too—they need strong teams around them who can listen, be honest and give a candid opinion.

Would you say the role of a distributor is more important than ever?

In this job, the sky’s the limit. There’s a path for everyone—if there’s a roadblock in one place, we can keep moving and find opportunities somewhere else.

We believe in supporting independent artists and labels who’ve already put a lot of time and effort into building their vision. At Virgin—and, before, at Caroline—we strive to do the best job for our partners, and in this day and age, that means something different for everyone. That’s what I love about this business: Everyone’s goals are unique.

You’ve seen the industry change so much.

It changes all the time. New platforms pop up constantly. You can’t miss a single place where there might be an audience.

With K-pop group Super M, Capitol Music Group Prexy Ashley Newton, SM Entertainment’s Soo Man-Lee, Jubelirer, Sawin and CMG EVP Promo Greg Marella.





Clockwise from top left: With Lisa Worden and Jubilirer at the City Of Hope Spirit of Life Gala 2022; with her girls; with Geoff Harris, Barnett, Ashley Newton, Sir Lucian Grainge, Habtemariam, Jubilirer and Don Was

What excites you about the future of Virgin?

Everything excites me about the future of the Virgin Music Group. When you surround yourself with good, like-minded people, you're gonna put wins on the board together. It feels like a family.

When you rebranded in 2020, during the pandemic lockdown, you turned your backyard into an office.

I did, because the energy that we feel when we're together is unmatched. I love being part of something that connects people, which is what music does.

Early this year you signed Lauv to Virgin, which was a big deal.

He's one of the most important independent artists out there. His name has become synonymous with self-made success. Look at his streaming, his touring, his radio presence—he did that himself. He really built his business, so when he came to us asking about a partnership, I jumped.

What are you focused on now?

10K Projects' Leah Kate, Mavin Records' Rema, FADER Label's Charlie Burg, Montell

Fish and his label, Lord's Child, Anson Seabra... There are so many exciting projects in development.

None of those artists can be crammed into a box, and neither can you. What's your secret?

I just decided one day that I'm going to be confident in who I am and how I behave. I'm my own type of executive. I appreciate how I operate much more now. I don't want to be like anyone else.

Sounds like the kind of advice you might share with one of the people under your guidance. What has inspired you to take the next generation under your wing?

A lot of that comes from my mom. She had breast cancer before they knew about the [BRCA1/ BRCA2] gene, and she was mentoring these young girls in Nashville who were being diagnosed with breast cancer at very young ages. She was always on the phone with them. She was always trying to help them. I saw how valuable it was to have this girl gang around you.

I naturally connect with young women over live music at shows. I try to mentor, help, introduce or teach. I love learning about people's histories and passions. I love connecting people and finding jobs for them. I love giving people their shots. There's room for everyone in this industry.

I strive to be accessible—to the point that it probably drives my assistant a little nuts.

With social media, you can reach out to people and contact them... people can get to know you. I always tell people not to hold back; you don't have to think, "Oh, I can't talk to that person because they're a president." Yes, you can! You can do anything now. You can be brave and bold and forge new relationships. My assistant will tell me, "You can't meet with every person." But I really do in one way or another. It's one of the best parts of my day when someone new contacts me and tells me what they're excited about.

I want to be the person they can talk to, in part because I didn't really have someone like that. I want to be the person who says, "You can do it all. Whatever your choice is, you can do it." ■

“EVERYTHING EXCITES ME ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE VIRGIN MUSIC GROUP. WHEN YOU SURROUND YOURSELF WITH GOOD, LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE, YOU’RE GONNA PUT WINS ON THE BOARD TOGETHER. IT FEELS LIKE A FAMILY.”