



# JOHN FLECKENSTEIN

## The Operator

INTERVIEW BY LARRY FLICK

**John Fleckenstein**—Fleck to his friends and colleagues—ascended to the role of Chief Operating Officer at **RCA Records** after a sterling run as co-president of the label. As the brother of industry legend **Chuck Fleckenstein**, currently a professor of Music Business at NYU, Fleckenstein, a native of Detroit, had an insider's point of view into the industry that set him on his path. He built his career with internships at **Columbia Records** and **Ruffhouse Records**, which led to an assistant's gig in the international department at **Arista**.



With Steve Lacy;  
below: Normani,  
Khalid and  
Kane Brown

“I got great advice from my brother,” Fleckenstein acknowledges. “But I worked my way up from the bottom. And working my way up taught me the business inside and out. It is hard not to notice that my 20-plus-year path began and continues to this day in the Sony system. That should say a lot about this place as well. Look no further than Rob Stringer—this is the same system he came up in and now he passionately drives that forward today.”

Fleckenstein has also put in time at Jive, as well as relocating to Sydney to oversee marketing and promotion for BMG’s Asia-Pacific Region. These positions ultimately led to a job running Sony Music’s international team, where he cultivated a vast knowledge of global music strategy as he created worldwide campaigns for some of the world’s biggest stars, such as Beyoncé, Daft Punk, Justin Timberlake and Miley Cyrus.

Since joining Peter Edge’s RCA team in 2015, he’s played a pivotal role in the careers of breakthrough acts including Khalid, Doja Cat, SZA and, most recently, Steve Lacy; and he’s rightfully proud of the key role he plays in the functioning of Nipper’s sophisticated, efficient operation.

“This might sound corny, but it’s all about the team,” Fleckenstein offers. “Artists

sign with people, not labels—that’s the reality. We’re only as good as our people and how we move together. I spend as much of my time quarterbacking our team as I do trying to deliver world-class campaigns for our current family of artists and chasing the next great breakthrough.”

As you’ll see, Fleck is in it to win it.

**What initially attracted you to music?**

Like probably everybody in this business, I had a deep connection with music in my youth. Perhaps the more direct answer would be that I have an older brother, **Chuck**, who was working in music when I was in school. He was the one who basically helped me figure out my first internship. That’s what set my course toward thinking I could actually make a career in this business.

**I see a piano behind you. Do you play?**

Not at all [laughs]. The piano is for the kids. This room is combination music room/Dad’s office for when I work from home.

**Have you been guiding them toward music?**

My wife and I have always wanted them to be, at least in some respect, fluent in music. For us, it was important that our kids have exposure to as many genres and theories of music as possible. Then they can decide what, if anything, they want to do with it.

**It seems like music has always been the family business. Was there ever a time you considered doing something else?**

I think the “family business” thing is probably because our name is very recogniz-





With Santana;  
below: with  
H.E.R., RCA boss  
Peter Edge and  
President of A&R  
Keith Naftaly

able. Ultimately, my family members have done very different things, but all really centered around some form of art. I grew up on the grounds of **Cranbrook Academy of Art** in Michigan, where my stepfather was the dean of the graduate art school and director of the museum. My biological father was an architect.

I'll give Chuck credit for showing me that you could actually have a career in music. I didn't even know you could do that. When I was in school, he said, "You should come visit me in New York in the summer—get an internship and see how it feels."

I did my internship at Columbia. Obviously, it was a different world back in the '90s, but I really connected with the culture. Not only did I love the music, but I also loved the people and the environment of the business around music. It was so alluring to me that you could have these two worlds come together, music and business.

That said, being a fan of music and working in music are often two different things. I've always deeply appreciated the creative process. It's almost like magic—it's something that must be conjured. Protected and curated. Growing up surrounded by creativity and then finding a way to create my own career within it was just inescapable to me.

When I started, how it came together was a little bit of a mystery. I came into the industry thinking what a lot of people do at first: "Well, I just need to go sign the next big thing." What I learned almost immediately is that it's so much bigger than that. There are so many other aspects. You can and need to

always be a passionate fan, but you have to understand the infrastructure and the mechanisms of the music business to succeed.

#### **What would you consider to be the pivotal break in your career?**

It was working on **Santana's** *Supernatural* album. My first official job was at Arista as an assistant on the international team. I didn't even know what that was; I just knew that everybody around me told me that you need to get your foot in the door, and you need to prove your worth and show people that you're competent.

I was quickly faced with the reality of the music business—that things change a lot. I found myself in a situation where my boss had recently exited the company and we were without a department head for a few months. **Clive Davis** had signed Carlos Santana, and they agreed to work on a project together. Our team was short-staffed, and they basically came to me and said, "You're doing a good job. Why don't you look after this?" I was so excited to have my own project and to be able to stay on it even when my new boss came in.

The record was a hit in America, and it had all these **Grammy** nominations. We knew we needed Carlos to promote his album in Europe, as he had not been there yet. We planned a press conference for the day after the Grammys in Madrid. I was very excited, because I was able to organize this whole thing, and it was my first big trip.

It was initially meant to be a 24-hour trip for me. But following the Grammy Awards, the excitement over Santana exploded and the tour that he was about to embark on became mayhem with the



With Sony Music chief Rob Stringer, RCA President Mark Pitts, Doja Cat and Edge



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media attention. Carlos and his team said, "We need you to stay with us and manage this whole thing," and 24 hours turned into almost a month. That was the moment that I look back on now and realize how much it taught me. It was an incredible experience that gave me a perspective that I don't think I could've gotten in any other way.

To watch that record explode the way that it did was extraordinary.

It was totally overwhelming. I saw firsthand how it affected Carlos too. It was such an amazing moment in his life, but I could also see the pressures he experienced as an artist. His experience has always stuck with me.

**Carlos has said that his spirituality informs how he works. Has working with that kind of artist informed how you proceeded with other artists and projects?**

Yes. Carlos is the real deal. He is not doing this because he's looking for a check; he's doing this because he has a vision and a purpose, and he has something that he must relate. I think about that even today in terms of how we find focus at RCA around true artistry. We want our artists to feel safe to create and experiment. We

firmly believe that if you allow it and you surround yourself with the right people, you can be commercially successful and true to your message as an artist.

**How does a label like RCA find those artists, when there are so many people who are continually trying to crack the code?**

First of all, data is key. You are not going to be competitive without it in today's market. But the data doesn't show you where you are going. It will not really tell you what to sign—it tells you what *not* to sign. We can use data to help narrow the scope, but ultimately, the only way to tell if someone is unique or has vision is to get to know them and have people in the room who are able to understand what sometimes seems like a wild, crazy vision for where the artist wants to go. This means you have to have great people and a company that is governed by music.

My boss, Peter Edge, sets the bar for our creativity. He is a true music person and is the principal force at RCA in defining a creative safe haven for artists. We, of course, share the day-to-day RCA load but he is supremely focused on our creative as CEO.

Bringing in the legendary artist-magnet

Top to bottom:  
With SZA, P!nk,  
Mark Ronson,  
Tyler Childers and  
Dan Chertoff



**in the current world? How do you move through a world where there is more music circulating than ever in history? You're clearly doing something right, but what exactly is it?**

Follow the music! We work to not just stay on top of things but to be as far ahead of the curve as possible. That puts you on the right path to ensure that you're standing up to the rich legacy of the label.

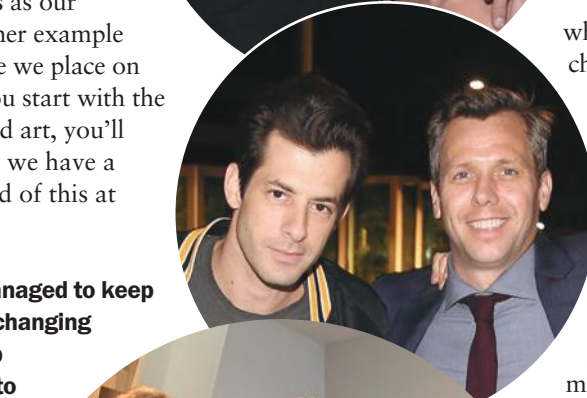
that is Mark Pitts as our president is another example of the importance we place on the creative. If you start with the music, culture and art, you'll find quality. And we have a great track record of this at RCA as a result.



Fundamentally, what we do hasn't changed all that much. Connecting artists to fans is the path between the artists and the fans that's changed endlessly.

**How have you managed to keep up with the ever-changing vocabulary of pop music? It seems to be moving faster than ever.**

The simplest answer to that is that I'm a bit of a nerd. I tend to study it. I read about it obsessively—books, articles, whatever I can find. I'm very focused on what's next. I have a penchant for technology too. I like to keep on top of it all.



If you look at this industry and what is transpiring, you have a music industry that has essentially moved from a transactional experience with a finite number of ways to bring a fan to an artist, to a wide variety of paths.



The one thing I've experienced in my years is that business never stops changing. There's always something next, even when you feel like it's hard to imagine what's next. There will always be a better way for someone to find music, a richer way for them to experience and enjoy it. So, for me, keeping up with the ever-changing vocabulary is an obsession but also a necessity.

Today, you have to let go of the notion that you can control everything. Instead of trying to control how someone hears something—or worse, trying to change what an artist creates—at RCA we search for ways to get music and artists in front of people who are going to be receptive.

**Is social media now as important as—or even more important than—radio in breaking an act?**

I would say everything is important. It's never one thing; it's a thousand small things done at the right time, in the right order. Social media is the best word of mouth for a record or for an artist—it's word of mouth on steroids. A fan saying, "Have you heard this? It's great." That right there is the holy

**How does a company with the size and the history of RCA stay relevant and competitive**



With Whitney Houston; below: with Edge, Childish Gambino and Stringer

grail of getting traction on an artist.

Radio remains very, very important. It's still the key that allows you to unlock a mass-market audience. It's also important in establishing brand awareness around a particular artist, so that the next time you put something out, people are much more likely to understand who that artist is.

**This is conjuring memories of the era of “lifestyle marketing,” for which there were people whose entire job was figuring out how to get a record played in a hair salon or a café. It seems like social media is the ultimate in lifestyle marketing, because you’re injecting the music into listeners’ lives. Can you foresee a further embedding of music into people’s daily lives beyond social media?**

I do. As technology evolves, so will the avenues of engagement and consumption. I asked my daughter, who’s 14, “You’re not on Instagram a lot?” She said, “I kind of go there. But to be honest, there’s not that much to do there. There’s just so more to do on TikTok.” I thought that was kind of fascinating. She had no ill will against Instagram—it was just matter of fact; short form is more dynamic than a photo—so, that’s what she will engage with. That was a great example of the market.

I think if you draw a lot of lines forward in this industry, you will find music literally

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everywhere. Remember, there was a time when it was controversial for an artist to put their music in a commercial. Now, everybody’s clamoring for syncs. It used to be unthinkable to do a brand endorsement. Now, everybody has 20. We are simply putting music into people’s ears in new ways.

People listen to music when they want, how they want. As long as this is the marketplace, I think there will be an increasing opportunity via social media, whether it’s Instagram, Facebook, Discord, TikTok or whatever is next. ■

