

LARRY JACKSON

The Insider

INTERVIEW BY MICHELLE SANTOSUOSSO



arry Jackson came up during the shift in music and culture driven by entrepreneurial Black artists like Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs, JAY-Z and Dr. Dre. Deeply curious about music, he also dug into the vinyl collections of his parents—San Francisco State professors who instilled in him the values of hard work and humility—and his aunts to absorb The O’Jays, Stevie Wonder, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie, “voraciously reading the liner notes.”

At 11, he began calling the request lines at KMEL-FM as it was transitioning into a tastemaker powerhouse. The youngster won prizes with such regularity that he was eventually banned from entering contests. Thanks to his prize-winning notoriety at the station, however, he was invited on a tour.

For the next four years, Jackson showed up every day after school as an unpaid intern. “I did whatever needed to be done on a menial-task level and more,” he says. This paid off when he was hired as assistant music director in KMEL’s programming department. Thereafter, he became manager of the station’s suite of artist-led shows, excelling as a reliable arbiter of cutting-edge hits. He proved a capable on-air personality and made himself an indispensable liaison to local label reps. But it was his intuitive approach to artists that emerged as his superpower.

Jackson’s rise was fast-tracked by a pair of industry titans: Clive Davis at RCA and J Records and Jimmy Iovine at Interscope. The latter relationship put him in the middle of the action when Iovine and Dr. Dre founded Beats, which morphed into Apple Music in 2015.

Thereafter, Jackson has been behind virtually every collaborative co-sign to the service—a list that includes Drake, The Weeknd, Taylor Swift, Frank Ocean, Ye and Nicki Minaj. Now, following his September 2022 exit from Apple Music, where he served as global creative director, Jackson is the subject of intense industry speculation as he plots his next move.

Jackson with Clive Davis



"I CAN'T OVERSTATE HOW MUCH WORKING WITH JIMMY ALLOWED ME TO EXPRESS MYSELF."

Clockwise from top left: Jackson with Jimmy Iovine, Sean Combs and Live Nation boss Michael Rapino; with Stevie Wonder and Combs; with DJ Khaled; with Apple's Eddy Cue

You went straight from being music director at KMEL to working with Clive. Tell me about that transition.

I would have stayed longer if the station hadn't fired [PD] Joey [Arbagey]. We were just starting to get some real traction under our feet, and the day the *Arbitron* book came out with KMEL at #1, they fired him. It was heartbreaking. That was my first lesson, at 18 years old, about corporate America and just how treacherous and nefarious it can be. That summer, I started to question whether radio was for me, and that's when I began to develop an uncompromising spirit around my business decisions, not simply taking the easiest path but

making decisions rooted in what was the wisest and most forward-thinking choice.

My friend and KMEL colleague Michelle Reed was deeply instrumental in connecting me to Keith Naftaly [then VP A&R at Arista], which got me the meeting with Clive. Keith and I had a chat about what was going on with Clive and his move from Arista to J. I flew to New York in August 2000 to meet with Clive, and the rest is history.

How did you prepare for that meeting?

Clive asked me to come in with a song I thought could be a hit. I'd developed a relationship with Big Jon [Platt], who was

at **EMI Publishing**—you could tell he had the eye of the tiger even then. He'd signed **Warryn Campbell** when I was still in radio, and I'd gotten a copy of **Mary Mary's** "Shackles (Praise You)," which Warryn had co-written and produced. It was a gospel record, but the shit was jammin'; we played it extensively at **KMEL**, and it became a bit of a hit and spread to other Urban/Crossover stations. Big Jon was grateful because Warryn was a big signing for him. This was when **Marty Bandier** was running **EMI Publishing**. So he'd reached out with gratitude when **KMEL** decided to take a leap and play this gospel record. I flew down to **L.A.** and had lunch with him at **La Petit Four**. I was 17 at the time and don't think I even told my parents I was going. I booked a ticket on **Southwest** and snuck out of town, took a taxi from **Burbank**, pulled up on **Sunset** and had a beautiful lunch with Jon. He gave me the time of day during a period when I faced real ageism; I was humbled and deeply appreciative.

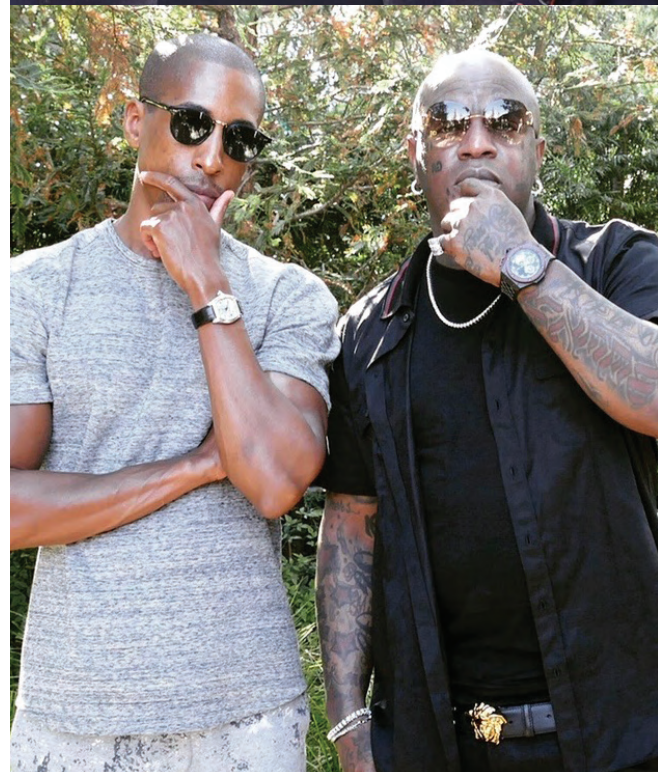
When I got the call from **Clive**, I didn't know anything about **A&R**; I didn't even know what a demo was. The only person I knew to call was **Big Jon**.

He **FedExed** me two songs from this new writer named **Harold Lilly** who'd teamed up with Warryn. One of them was "Take You Out" and the other was "Girl." **Clive** went crazy for them. He not only hired me on the spot, but we recorded "Girl" with **O-Town** and "Take You Out" with **Luther Vandross**, and that became Luther's first single on **J Records**. So **Big Jon** had armed me with the sword I needed to go into that meeting and slay. I realize now that it was beginner's luck—having gone through that process in subsequent years, finding demos like that, that quickly, is an impossibility. You don't really stumble on hits.

So you're at J Records now. Clive is tough, demanding and expects a lot. I imagine you went immediately into the ring.

First day on the job was September 11, 2000. I was in a bungalow at the **Beverly Hills Hotel**, the full speaker setup. That was my introduction to the nine-hour producer/songwriter meeting, a nonstop parade of music at blaring volumes. Every producer wanted to come and play music for **Clive**, learn from **Clive**. It was **Clive**, **Keith** and me

*With Clarence
Avant; with Cash
Money's Birdman*





“SEEING HOW THESE ARTISTS WERE FINDING WAYS TO BLAZE THEIR TRAILS OUTSIDE RADIO GAVE US THE COURAGE OF OUR CONVICTION THAT A NEW CONSUMPTION PARADIGM COULD OVERTAKE THE TRADITIONAL OUTLETS.”

Ed Sheeran,
Jackson,
filmmaker
Murray
Cummings
and Apple
Music's
Zane Lowe

that first day. Then back to New York and working out of the **Waldorf Astoria**, which was equally special. I was at the label for 10 amazing years; I started in September of 2000 and got fired in October of 2010.

What was some of the music you worked on?

Chronologically, Luther was the first thing I did, then O-Town. We worked on **Santana**, then [RCA Music Group SVP A&R/Marketing] **James Diener** brought in **Gavin DeGraw**. But what really gave me confidence was when we signed **Tyrese**—on my 21st birthday at Clive's home in Pound Ridge. I'd done a label deal with **The Underdogs** [Harvey Mason Jr. and **Damon Thomas**] a year prior, and they delivered Tyrese's "How You Gonna Act Like That."

Clive would call me between 11pm and midnight Monday through Thursday and ask about **BDS** or what I thought about a strategy for **Maroon 5** or what I thought about this *Pop Idol* thing **Simon Fuller** came in with. And then, when we got **Arista** after **L.A. [Reid]** left for **Def Jam**, he gave me this

huge binder of the 70 artists on **Arista** and said, "You've got to listen to all this; what are the hits?" It was a massive education.

You were understandably shook when you were suddenly shown the door, but that was the start of the Jimmy Iovine era for you.

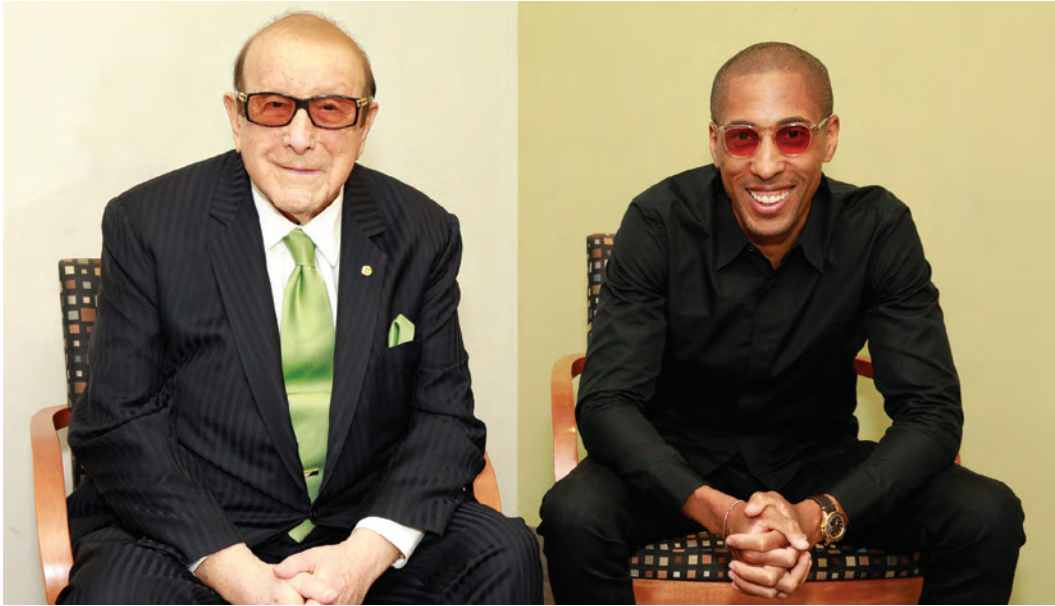
The exit from Sony was unexpectedly the gift of all gifts. I found that you don't need that many people on your side, just the *right* person—the right sponsor, the right believer. And that was Jimmy. But our relationship was already strong. We'd discussed the possibility of my coming to **Interscope** two or so years earlier. At the time, Clive and I were producing **Whitney Houston's** last studio album, *I Look to You*, and she and I were enormously close. I wanted to complete what we'd started, so I stayed largely because of Whitney but also for **Jennifer [Hudson]**, whose debut album I was finishing.

The evening of the day I was unjustly fired for cause, Jimmy reached out, saying, "Can you come to work on Monday?" I said, "Dude, I just got sucker-punched. But

I deeply appreciate and am flattered by the offer and your continued interest. Let me process what just happened; I'll get back to you at the top of the week."

About a year before I was fired, I'd signed a new four-year deal with Sony to become president of Arista. But, in retrospect, it wasn't for the right reasons; in that moment, I wasn't as adventurous or as fearless as I

should have been. My creative thirst wasn't being quenched, and the experience had become something of a hamster wheel. After a while, I wondered, what am I trying to prove? The world is as big as you make it, and there's nobody who gets that like Jimmy—nobody. And I'm so glad to have had this left-brain/right-brain education from Clive and Jimmy.



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Top: With Davis; bottom: with Nicki Minaj; with Travis Scott



Top to bottom: With Barry Weiss, Whitney Houston, Alicia Keys, Davis and Tom Corson; with Tim Cook and Drake; with Dr Dre

There are certainly some fundamental differences between them.

The first week I was at Interscope, I was sitting in a meeting with Jimmy. Lady Gaga's debut album, *Fame Monster*, was at a gazillion records sold that week, and I asked Jimmy, "Do you know how much it sold this week?" He gives me a look and snaps, "I haven't read **SoundScan** in five years—I don't fucking know what it sold. Go ask Clive that question." That's when I realized I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I was now working with someone coming from a different side of the brain with a different intent relative to where he saw the business going. It didn't have anything to do with even monolithic metrics but everything to do with new technologies, new distribution channels, consumer products like **Beats by Dre** headphones... It was an amazing rewiring of my brain, accessing something I hadn't had a chance to tap into before Jimmy.

How did Beats products segue into the streaming business?

In December of 2010, not long after Jimmy and I started working together, I made an observation; during my time living in New York, I'd witnessed the explosion of smartphone use on the subway. Based on this, I had the idea to expand Beats past headphones and get into powering smartphones from an audio and branding perspective—"powered by Beats." He thought it was a smart move and pursued it.

We made a deal with the Taiwan smartphone maker **HTC**. They invested in Beats and put Beats audio technology on HTC phones—which were marketed as "powered by Beats." That allowed us to branch out into other technology alignments. Then Jimmy and I started talking about what distribution could look like attached to an original-content engine like Interscope. We thought up Beats Music as a sort of recommendation service for people who wanted to know what was latest and next. Jimmy bought the streaming service **MOG**, and we set out to refurbish it and turn it into what we launched in late 2013 as Beats Music.

At the time I was not only working at Interscope and signing incredible artists like **Lana Del Rey** and **Chief Keef** but managing **Kanye West** during the *YEEZUS* album and tour. The projects I was working on informed the architecture of Beats Music regarding product, UI design and the

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overall cultural perspective of the service. It also informed how I thought we should approach the algorithmic recommendation engine for the product, which I worked on with the brilliant data scientists at **Seed Scientific**. **Pandora** had developed the basic song-shuffle idea, but this was the first algorithm for a music-streaming service. Seed Scientific later went exclusively to **Spotify**.

Again, though, the artists at Interscope who were doing well in the early days of streaming and on **YouTube** informed the feel and attitude of the product/service. **Lana Del Rey** was the #1 female artist in the world on Spotify in 2013, and **Chief Keef** was massive on YouTube and **Twitter**. Seeing how they were finding ways to blaze their trails outside radio gave us the courage of our conviction that a new consumption paradigm could overtake the traditional outlets.

Jimmy seems to embody a fierce unconventionality, and you signed artists like Lana who reflected that.

I can't overstate how much working with Jimmy allowed me to express myself. The first artist I signed, with my former executive assistant-turned-A&R guru, **John Ehmann**, was Lana. I mortgaged everything I had credibility-wise at **Universal** to make that work. I left it all on the field. I cared so much—too much. And I specifically pursued Lana as the first artist I signed at Interscope because at J Records I primarily worked with Black female artists. I wanted to find and develop a white artist, a “pop” artist, I felt could be a global superstar.

In a lot of instances, promotion and marketing get the blame from A&R execs if a project doesn't connect. I didn't want to have anyone to blame if this didn't, so I did anything and everything I could to will it into being a success—even unbeknownst to the artist's camp. For instance, I maneuvered to

give half the profits away to **Polydor** in the U.K. and co-venture it with **Ferdy [Unger-Hamilton]**, who headed Polydor U.K. at the time] to have protection on my own turf back at the label. I came up with the idea to write a letter to **Lorne Michaels**, which I, of course, had Jimmy sign, to make **SNL** happen. Lana's performance on **SNL** was entirely different from the formulaic 120- to 128-bpm pop out at the time, which is exactly why it cut through the clutter.

To be an African American A&R executive at a record label and make that kind of thing happen is rare, unfortunately; we're often not given those chances. For me, it became a personal fixation to make this one successful because I felt it would help me not be pigeonholed as a Black executive who could only identify and nurture Black artists—a stereotype applied to many of us. *Born to Die* became a massive success and cultural reset thanks to the teamwork of Lana, **John [Janick]**, [Interscope's] **Julie Hovsepian**, **Nathalie Besharat** and **Gary Kelly**, [TaP Management's] **Ben Mawson** and **Ed Millett**, Ferdy and me. The album has now spent 450 weeks on the *Billboard* 200 and is the first major-label debut album by a female artist to achieve that milestone.

You've repeatedly had a unique vantage point. What have you learned from that?

The first thing I'd say is discretion—not everything needs to be shared, gossiped about or made into an “Instagrammable moment.” Also, how important it is to maintain a sense of self; if you approach your craft as if you're an NPC in a video game, nobody is going to relate to you or feel your rich heart or deep passion and purpose. Maintaining individuality was super-important to me so I could continue to connect with the creative community that's influenced so much of who I am today. ■