

LILLIA PARSA

THE NATURAL

Interview by Katherine Turman

As a young woman starting out in the music industry, **Lillia Parsa** recalls, “I think people underestimated me. But my way is to not let what people have to say hold me back. I just keep pushing.”

The end result: a meteoric rise from an inquisitive college intern to the role of senior vice president of A&R at **Universal Music Publishing Group**. Parsa’s friendly, down-to-earth demeanor belies a fierce work ethic and seasoned song sensibility that helped earn her roster of writers—including hitmakers **Nija Charles** (**Cardi B**, **Beyoncé & Jay-Z**, **Summer Walker**) and the “dream team” of **Blake Slatkin** and **Omer Fedi** (**The Kid LAROI**, **Lil Nas X**, **24Goldn**)—multiple Top 10 hits and **Grammy** nominations.

Underestimate her at your own risk.



Where did you grow up? Did you come from a musical family?

I grew up in L.A. I come from a very Persian family. Growing up, my mom would play Persian music, but when I was a teenager, she would always play 102.7 [KIIS-FM]. She'd take me to Staples for Wango Tango, I'd see Britney Spears, NSYNC... always pop music. I would go to a lot of concerts. Before Usher was massive, I had his first CD, and I would listen to it on my MP3 player. I was such a kid! I had different phases; I also loved Eminem, Nirvana, Lorde and Kid Cudi.

How did you decide you wanted to pursue a career in music?

I started to figure it out when I went to USC. During my junior year, I met Shawn Holiday, who worked at the time at Columbia Records and Sony/ATV. I didn't know then that I wanted to be in music; I met Shawn because he's gym friends with my godfather, which is a very L.A. story. I asked him for an internship and he gave it to me. He really took care of me, had me sit in on meetings, asked my opinion. I couldn't have asked for



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Left to right: UMPG EVP/Head of A&R and Head of Global Creative Group David Gray, S2 Songs' Sonny Takhar, UMPG Chairman/CEO Jody Gerson, S2 Songs' Savan Kotecha and Parsa

a better person to bring me into the music industry.

At the time, he had that dual role. So I started my internship on the Columbia label side. It was definitely not a conventional internship, because he had me so involved. I would see him go from label A&R to publishing A&R, and the publishing side piqued my interest. Once I was in the door, I was totally sold. I wanted the opportunity to work with writers, producers and artists.

What's the first thing that strikes you about a song?

Growing up when I would listen to records, I would always pay attention to lyrics first. I remember looking up and reading Eminem lyrics. I had a love for publishing without knowing it. With publishing, it's always about the song and the songwriting.

What happened after graduation?

I was interning and managing a songwriter, but I needed a full-time job, a salary. Through my meetings as a manager, I met Beka Tischker, and she offered me my first job in publishing at Prescription Songs as a coordinator. I would look at all these other publishers and think, That's the dream; that's

what I want to be. I felt the job was the entry point for me to become a serious publisher, and I got out of managing.

What did you learn at Prescription?

Beka was great at being the smartest person in the room but not making everyone feel that. Sure, I struggled in situations with different people. She'd say, "Just keep it classy, keep pushing." She was always moving the goalposts for me. Beka also said that sometimes confrontation isn't worth it.

How long were you there, and what was your next move?

It was pretty brief, about eight months. I was hustling to try and get things signed, coordinating sessions, sending a lot of emails. And that's how **David Gray** at UMPG heard about me. So much of the industry is based on your reputation, and I think he saw me as a reliable person who worked hard from seeing me on all these emails. He called and said, "Come in; let's meet." When I met with David, I'd had my brief experience at Prescription, but I hadn't signed anything. I can't pinpoint why he hired me, but the next day he offered me the job. David was patient with me and taught me the ropes. No question was a dumb question. This was when I really got involved with deals from the publisher standpoint. So I owe him a lot.

How interested are you in the business side versus the creative?

When I started, I wanted to know everything. I would sit with whoever would sit with me to run me through every term. I wanted to understand publishing deals, but I like to stay fully creative. I went into every A&R's office with a notepad and said, "Who do you need help on? Who are the writers, who are the producers who don't have much going on? How can I help them?"

I got all my list of people to connect with. During my first three weeks on the job, I actually found **Nija Charles**. I was setting up sessions for a producer signed to us named **Needlz**, who is amazing and so talented. I had heard of Nija; she was an NYU student at the time. I connected with a student there who told me Nija was doing a lot of things. I was just figuring things out, but I was scrappy. So I emailed an A&R at a different company, and they suggested Nija. I had no music—I had nothing—but I said, "Let's do it." And **Needlz** agreed, even though he was already a big producer at the time.

I met with him, and he played me two songs. One of them was [2018's] "Ring," with **Cardi B** and **Kehlani**. Obviously, the track sounds a lot different from the demo, because they came in and wrote their parts. But the original song was Nija, **Needlz** and this other producer named **Scribz Riley**. It was a set-up session. **Needlz** came to me and said, "I had the best session ever; thank you for setting it up." He played me the song, and it was amazing. I was like, "Who is this girl?" I had Nija's number from the other NYU student, so I texted her: "Hey, I'm Lillia. I would love to meet with you. I heard this song from the session I set up." She gave me her manager's number.

What happened next was the song was played during an A&R meeting. I'd been hired for a low-level job, and I was nervous. So at the end of the A&R meeting, I said, "Can I present something?" I played the early version of "Ring," and when it was over, everyone stood up. They were like, "How was I not on this?" It was an amazing moment.

So I called **Christian McCurdy**, Nija's manager. He told me, "You're kind of late. We have two or three other publishers already." Like, "Who are you?" After our meeting, David walked into my office, and he said, "This is gonna happen, and you stay next to it; stay very close." He really applied the pressure that I needed. I called the manager, and he still wasn't having it, so I used every executive in the building who had more going on. A lot of other executives helped me internally.

This is where **Jody Gerson** taught me a lot. I was just two weeks into the



Parsa with Legion Management chief Christian McCurdy and writer/producer Nija Charles



Parsa (middle) with writers Blake Slatkin, Billy Walsh, Omar Fedi and Lou Bell

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job, and I wanted to sign a competitive deal. Jody really wanted me to fight for it; she wanted to see that I was passionate. Every day I would barge into her office. She'd say, "Who would you put her in with? What have you set up? How are you going to help her become a hit songwriter?" Always asking the right questions. I would come back every week with updates until Jody would approve. It was what I needed.

At that point, every publisher was in, and I just kept going and getting more set up for Nija. I kept flying her in from New York, trying to get more things set up. We had a great creative slow roll. It took about eight months to sign her. I never let go—I kept calling every day.

Hooking up with Blake Slatkin and Omer Fedi happened not long after that, right?

I met Blake first through his manager at the time. Blake was Benny Blanco's intern, and Benny's his hero. I loved his energy. I was working him every day; I really believed in him, and at the time he didn't have much going on besides an insane amount of talent. I felt like we were the underdogs together, but I always admired the way he could relate to anyone and make everyone feel instantly comfortable. It drew me to him. I'm not going to lie, it was tough in the beginning; we got a lot of nos. But anytime I put him in a session with an artist, they would ask for him back or cancel whatever else they had going on.

How do you take those rejections?

You take the nos, but I also think you fight back; it's always about keeping it positive with the artists, the creatives. You're going to get nos until you get yesses. You need thick skin early on to fight for the deal and be competitive and go up against people. As a producer or songwriter, you need the same type of thick skin. Because no one really believes in you until you have songs on the charts.

Nija really opened up a lot of doors for me by taking a chance on me and us working together. It gave me the confidence I needed, and more things started coming my way.

So you worked with Blake prior to Omer?

About a year prior to working with Omer. Blake didn't have big #1 records, but people always asked for him back, so I knew something was working.



Top: with Fedi
Middle: with Bell
Bottom: with Slatkin

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I met Omer—his manager **Connor Ambrose** brought him to see me—and it was a really funny meeting. Most producers and songwriters come in and say, "I want to work with the A-list," but Omer said, "I have my friends, I believe in us, we have this thing that we're growing." It was really refreshing. But he also said, "I don't know if I really need a publisher."

My ego was a little bruised, but Omer was so compelling—he was the first person who came in and believed in himself and what he was building. I admired that. I thought about our meeting for a couple months; then I called Connor and asked if they would come back, and they did. Omer showed up wearing a penguin hat, played some music and I was instantly hooked. I knew I wanted to work with him. There's something magical about putting people together, and I'd been working closely with Blake, so I said, "You guys should work together." Then Omer and Blake went off and had that run.

And how did the Halsey songs on *Manic* happen?

I was working with Delacey; David Gray signed her. **Austin Rosen**, **Gabz Landmann** and I put together a session, and that was the beginning of that record. I'd always wanted to do something with **Lou Bell**. He was already established as a producer, and I was a huge fan of what he was doing—but he was signed to another publishing company. That was the beginning of our relationship, and we just stayed close. Sometimes in publishing it takes three, four, five years, and I wanted to show him that I was worthy of him coming with us—that the company was worthy of him.

It seems like the average numbers of writers and producers on a song is getting higher.

Most people don't really know the backstory on how a song came about. Sometimes it's a sample or an interpolation. I'm all about collaboration. I love putting people together, a lot of my people love working with each other and it's smart to go in with other people that you can borrow tricks from creatively. But eight people in the room together in writing a hit song? I don't even know how that would work out [laughs]. It's more, say, one of my creatives will find a hook that was sent to them from someone they love. It's like, "Wow, this hook's amazing, but we're just gonna use the melody, rewrite the verses and rewrite the hook lyrics." And that probably adds two more people on the song.

How would you describe your working relationship with Jody these days?

I would not be where I am without Jody. We talk a lot, and she's very involved in all the people I work with. She's there when I need her. I can't believe how she does it all—she stays creative and on the ground with talent as she's running a global company. But whenever I need her to make those big calls, she'll always do it for me. Or sometimes she'll do it on her own and connect people in that big way. Jody is tough on you in all the right ways, but she's also incredibly patient. Once you prove yourself, she gives you more leeway. She let me sign other people because she saw that I was having success with the things that I was bringing in. I had to prove myself; it wasn't just handed to me. But proving myself is what made me a better executive. ■