





NICOLE WYSKOARKO

WIDENING HER SCOPE

Interview by Simon Glickman

nterscope Geffen A&M EVP Co-Head of A&R **Nicole Wyskoarko** comes by her intense work ethic and passion for music honestly—as she details below, both were inculcated in her from a young age. Like many of her predecessors and

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more than a few contemporaries in the biz, Wyskoarko began in the legal trenches before making the move to the creative side. A long-time hip-hop fan, she began her career with a dream job at **Island Def Jam**. Her subsequent tenure as a partner at law firm **Carroll Guido Groffman Cohen Barr and Karalian LLP** sharpened and expanded her skill set. By the time she arrived at **John Janick's** IGA in 2018 (as EVP, urban operations), Wyskoarko had cultivated a deep understanding of everything from dealmaking to record-making.



Top: Moneybagg Yo (in front) poses for a photo op with his son and Interscope team members (l-r) Akeem Rollock, Ramon Smickle-Alvarez, Aura Harewood, Murdoc Hardy, Vincenza Conticchio, Laura Carter, Lauren Gaspard, Grace Alura Gaskins, Wyskoarko, Krystal Allen, Chantz Brewer and Keinon Johnson; bottom: Wyskoarko with attorney Angela Rogers, IGA boss John Janick and Interscope Urban Promo's Larry Khan

Where did you grow up and what was your home life like?

I was born in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of L.A. and raised in the Inland Empire, about 60 miles east of L.A. I grew up in a really strict household. My mom fled Communist Cuba as a teenaged political refugee. My dad was working-class second-generation Eastern European born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens. He put himself through college and medical school. Everything was about hard work, hitting the books, discipline. The message was strict work, hard academics—that's how you're going to survive.

And that's now part of your wiring.

It's absolutely ingrained in me. Those were the core values in our house. It was nonstop from both sides.

Were your parents music fans?

There was always music playing. My parents invested in music—there were lots of records, tapes and then CDs in the house. And they went to concerts with their friends; they ran off to concerts looking like young kids.

I heard everything growing up—

Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, Stevie Wonder, Sade, Anita Baker, Tina Turner, Phil Collins... My mom was really into Latin music because of her upbringing, so there was always a lot of Celia Cruz playing and all sorts of Cuban salsa classics. My mom would break into a dance at any moment.

What was the first record from that collection you reached for?

My first vinyl was Whitney Houston—when I was about seven. I was drawn to a mixture of R&B and pop. I was really into New Edition and Prince and then hip-hop. I remember when it was kind of a fringe movement. I was just enthralled, pulled in.

Something your parents might not understand.

My parents didn't understand it at first, but they understood being young and being drawn to something new and edgy, so they were always supportive of what I listened to, whether or not it was their thing at the time. I was allowed to listen to curse words as long as I didn't repeat them at home.

Did you play an instrument?

I played piano, and violin and flute for a shorter period of time—all classical. It never occurred to me that that was a career until much later in life because of my parents' traditional approach to what your options are.

Was your playing part of being well rounded?

Absolutely. It was always understood:

"You're gonna go to college—and you should probably figure out what level of higher education is going to happen after that." I appreciate that they pushed because not everyone has those expectations. I don't personally think it's necessary for everyone to go through college and grad school. Everyone has a unique path. But it worked out for me. I thought I was going to go into finance or something like that, not because I had any passion for it, though; it was just about, "What are the traditional options?" You can work in finance, you can be an accountant, you can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer.



Top: With Janick, No Name Recordings' Dan Maynard and Derek Ali (MixedByAli) and Interscope's Tim Glover and Steve Berman; bottom: with Prophet of B.M.A.C. and 50/50 Music Group, Cactus Jack's Bizzy, GIANT/Full Stop's Shawn "Tubby" Holiday and Warner's Steve Carless

It's about stability.

Yes. A lot of that comes from my mom's side and everything she went through to get here to have a better life.

You can't choose a frivolous line of work.

Anything that sounds like entertainment—that's just not a career. I went to USC for undergrad. I transferred there from UC Berkeley my sophomore year. Had I not done that, maybe I wouldn't have figured it out.

But USC has a lot of options related to entertainment. Someone told me about this music-industry major at USC, which combined classes from several disciplines; this person had just taken a course taught by Don Passman. That sounded really interesting. Then I found out about Passman's book, and I was, like, holy shit! This is it right here. I was so excited. I had this massive epiphany, and I went home to tell my parents: *I've figured out my life*. They were just, like, "I don't get it. We thought you were majoring in business administration or that you were going to law school." I don't really know why I listened to them, but they said, "You can't do this."

You wanted their approval.

I wanted their approval. So I said, "What about a communications major?" And they said, "OK, that seems like something you'd be able to support yourself with." So that was the compromise. I try not to have regrets in life, but I would've loved to have taken a class with Passman. That program also offered music engineering and production classes, and it would've been great to have that behind-the-scenes studio experience.

I had this detour, but again, I think the lesson is, there's no one path; everyone has their way of getting there.

How did the next part of your path unfold?

I ended up interning for a female-run PR firm, **Stellar Quest**, which represented a lot of film and TV people. They wanted to hire me. I loved our clients, and I loved the women I worked for. But the

job meant reading the film and TV trades every day when I wanted to read the music trades! It all boiled down to this question of what you'd do if you weren't being paid—how would you spend your day?

I wanted to work in music, and at the time the music industry felt to me really heavily based in New York. So I had to figure out how to get to New York. I liked reading liner notes; I'd read the acknowledgements and look at the label credits and job titles. I always noticed business and legal affairs, which told me, these people exist; this *job* exists. I thought once I got to New York, I could get an internship at a record label—preferably Def Jam, because



PHOTO: CASSIDY SPARROW/GETTY IMAGES/INTERSCOPE



Top: With Geffen's Aaron "Dash" Sherrod, Interscope's Baroline Diaz and artists Rob49, Lebra Jolie and Sally Sossa at IGA's 2022 BET Awards pre-party; bottom: with Interscope's Keinon Johnson, LVRN's Tunde Balogun, Junia Abaidoo, Justice Baiden, Carlon Ramong and Amber Grimes, Interscope's Randy Henderson, artist Summer Walker and Interscope's Aura Harewood

"FINDING CLIENTS WAS SIMILAR TO DISCOVERING AND PURSUING ARTISTS TO SIGN AT A LABEL. AND SOME CLIENTS WERE OPEN TO HAVING ME INVOLVED IN THEIR CREATIVE PROCESS, TOO."

it had all the hip-hop acts I listened to at the time. I took the LSATs, applied to law school and got accepted at **Brooklyn Law** with an offer of discounted housing in Brooklyn. I'd actually always wanted to move to New York. Being from the L.A. area, it was so different and exciting and raw. That energy.

How did you find your way to IDJ?

I sent out over 100 resumes, but I didn't get a single response—until I finally heard back from Island Def Jam! They invited me to come in and interview. I thought, they may not realize this, but they are definitely hiring me. So I went and met with the business and legal affairs team. I think what struck them was I knew everything about the label, including the names of all the executives. Also, weirdly enough, I'd worked at a restaurant in L.A. where [**Uptown Records** founder/**Motown** CEO] **Andre Harrell** was an investor, and **Brian Robinson**, one of the IDJ lawyers, had spent a few months in L.A. while I worked there and realized we'd met before.

And you were ultimately hired in Business and Legal Affairs.

Yes. **Jeff Kempler** led the department at the time and **Brian Robinson** was SVP. I started off interning. Everyone told me that they didn't hire interns in that department, so I tried to be indispensable. Then there was a change in leadership and Jeff left. So the exec I'd spent all that time building a relationship with was gone. What do I do?

Steve Gawley came in from **Arista** with **L.A. Reid**. I needed to build a relationship with him quickly because I was at the end of school and about to take the bar. I pitched him and built from there. Eventually, they found a position for me, but it wasn't as an attorney. At this point I'd graduated from law school, but the offer I got was to be the file clerk. I thought, well, it's like starting in the mail room. And I didn't stay in that position very long; after about nine months I moved up to attorney. But it was sink or swim. I know it sounds like a cliché, but I was the first one in in the morning and the last one out at night.

I think it's really important to note what an incredible mentor and guide **Steve** has been to me, and that he saw something in me quickly and took a shot on hiring me. Fortunately, another incredible attorney, **Michael Seltzer**, had overlapped with me in that transition, and **Steve** and **Michael** really took me under their wing.

Did you get face time with Reid?

Yes, I got to work really closely with **L.A.** on signings, which was a great experience. Everyone's opinion was valued, so it was never like I was too junior to have that type of interaction. It was incredibly empowering.

That was an era when we were doing a lot of on-the-spot signings. We'd have artists come in to showcase—we'd be in the office at four in the morning on a Saturday—and it was like, all right, don't let them leave the building!

I worked closely with **Ludacris'** imprint, **Disturbing tha Peace**. They were really gracious; **Chaka Zulu** and **Jeff Dixon**, who ran the company, were important mentors to me. And then [current **Roc Nation** execs] **Jay Brown** and **TyTy** came into the building with **JAY-Z**, and they were always really great as well; they provided a lot of guidance on how to maneuver in the business.

At this point you're stretching your wings in a lot of ways, but you decided to go into the law-firm world. What drove that decision?

Early in my career, I avoided working at law firms. I wanted to get into the music business but not necessarily the law side of it. Around 2016, I was able to work with the team at **Republic** in addition to IDJ. I had all this incredible experience and knew I could continue to excel at **Universal**, but I felt I needed something outside the label space—to be challenged in a different way, outside my comfort zone. I also wanted to be closer to the artists. Managers and

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artists were constantly coming to me for advice, asking me to break it down for them. I enjoyed that, being able to explain what's going on and lay things out clearly and succinctly, cut to the chase. And I was willing to be completely uncomfortable to do it. So I decided to take a leap and leave what had become a really comfortable space for me.

It was also about learning the full record business, not just the record-label business. I knew I could serve people better if I were more well-rounded. There was also something incredibly entrepreneurial for me about going to a firm and that was something I needed to do—betting on myself. And there was a part of it that was a steppingstone to A&R with finding my own clients.

Fortunately, I had great relationships at several firms. I joined Carroll, Guido & Groffman, which I'd worked closely with on the label side. I knew we'd be aligned in terms of philosophy. They pulled me in as a partner out of the gate because of my stature on the label side. But I didn't have any prior experience at a firm. So once again it was sink-or-swim time.

But you finally got to tell your parents you were at a law firm.

Yeah, they were excited. 15 years into my career, they were, like, "She's a real lawyer now."



With Frances Berman, Janick, Steve Berman and Benny Blanco at Coachella 2019

Who were some of your key clients?

H.E.R. was one of my first clients, before her releases, before the Grammys. I started working with her during her transition into young adulthood, and I knew she was going to be a superstar. I also brought in Playboi Carti, Meek Mill, Mustard and Lil Mosey, among others.

You've said this was in some ways a precursor to doing A&R, because you were making determinations about the career prospects of these creators.

Yes, finding clients was similar to discovering and pursuing artists to sign at a label. And some clients were open to having me involved in their creative process, too. I was spending more time in

studios. Some clients wanted input: What do you think about this producer, this song, this songwriter?

Whereas at the label, if you're in biz and legal, that stuff is usually somebody else's lane.

Exactly. So whatever your strong points were, you could jump in and think outside the box compared to what was traditionally expected of a label attorney.

But you did make your way back to the label world.

Right. Some of my clients were at Interscope—I signed them there. I was building a relationship with the label, so it was a natural transition. I wasn't actually looking to go back to a label. But in getting to know more of the people there, particularly John [Janick] and Steve Berman, and seeing this entrepreneurial spirit and this feeling of a company that doesn't really operate like a traditional record label...

Very un-corporate.

Not corporate, truly artist-friendly, focused on their vision. Just a different type of culture. It didn't feel like just going back to a traditional record label—it felt new and different.



Top: With RM of BTS and Grade A's Bibby; bottom: with Interscope's Tim Glover and Geffen's Dash

And it wasn't a legal gig.

Right. I wouldn't have gone back to the label world if it were because I'd felt I'd done that already. I initially came in as EVP of urban operations, and the idea was to bring together all these different experiences I've had to help shape and drive the hip-hop and R&B side of the roster. The job hadn't existed before; I wasn't replacing somebody. That was exciting.

When we first met you described yourself as a mama bear. That really struck me because companies need people who are fiercely protective of creators.

It's about seeing beyond the business piece of it, understanding the needs of artists, including those of their managers and partners, understanding what's going on in their lives and how that impacts things, including things they might not know how to speak up about. This business depends on creative individuals; we're not manufacturing parts. And in a lot of cases, even though creating might not be new to them, the *business* of creating is. How do you help them navigate that? It's so important to have a safe space, to build that trust, to have that real conversation. And people usually feel comfortable talking to me. And when people can be real with you, it's easier to find the pathway to whatever it is you're trying to get to. I take the same approach to the team of employees and execs I work with.

How do you feel A&R has changed in the last few years?

Because of the information we have in the digital space, A&R has changed a lot; whether you're more data-driven or not, it still has impacted your process, which is good and bad. The speed to market is another thing that's changed a lot. When I started, you needed six- to eight-weeks' lead time, because you were manufacturing CDs, which meant fewer projects were coming out. Now, you have the ability to produce and release material more quickly and frequently as an artist and, as a result, have more information about what your fans are responding to.

With our team, we want to make sure we're finding artists with a strong vision, strong creatives who are real career artists, where we're helping build a long-term brand. But now you do have these other data points that are helpful in guiding you.

Plus, it's a global community of creatives now, and that has created a really interesting space for creators to collaborate that didn't exist before; an artist in Memphis can connect with a producer in Norway who's posting beats on YouTube, or they find each other on Twitch.

Tell us a bit about some of your philanthropic focus.

I chair the Institutional Change Committee of the UMG Task Force for **Meaningful Change**. I was integral to Interscope's initial HBCU internship program, which was the basis for the program we launched for UMG with TFMC, which provides a stipend for housing to help students move here. We were preparing that when the pandemic hit. With the task force, we were able to bring it back for the entire UMG organization.

I'm also on the advisory board for the **Clive Davis Institute**, which is really special because I've always been fascinated by Clive, because he started as an attorney in the business and then became such an important discoverer of talent. It's great to be able to work with all these young creatives coming out of the institute.

I contribute to some other initiatives, too, like **The Steve and Ilene Berman Family Foundation**, which pushes for housing in Los Angeles. And I'm on the board of the **T.J. Martell Foundation**. I'm also involved with the **Harmony Program**, which provides music training to underserved communities across New York City.

And you do all this in your copious free time.

Exactly!■