

STEPHANIE YU

QUICK STUDY

INTERVIEW BY KEITH MURPHY

Truth be told, **Stephanie Yu** never envisioned herself being lauded as a rising legal force in the music industry. In the early aughts, the New Jersey native was too busy practicing corporate law at the prestigious New York firm **Covington & Burling**, where she handled litigation and white-collar criminal cases. That all changed in 2005, when a former boss—who'd already moved over to the music biz—asked if she was interested in taking the reins as a litigator at **Sony Music's** corporate law department. The second daughter of immigrants hit the ground running, garnering a reputation as a sharp and uncompromising legal talent; over the years, she has orchestrated buzz-heavy recording and licensing deals for such top acts as **Travis Scott**, **DJ Khaled**, **21 Savage** and **Future**.

Since then, her career trajectory has been relentless. After a decade-long stint at **Epic Records** in which she was named SVP, head of business & legal affairs, the **University of Chicago** alum was elevated by label ruler **Sylvia Rhone** in 2020 to EVP. But Yu, who currently also oversees Epic's brand marketing and sync-licensing teams, is at heart still a Jersey girl who knows her '90s hip-hop, speaks proudly of her roots in social-justice advocacy and is quite smitten with her dog.



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How did you make the unusual jump from criminal law to head of biz and legal at Epic?

When I was in law school, I was defending people on death row on their appeals. When I graduated, I went to work at Covington & Burling, and I did a lot of white-collar crime cases. I worked for this one partner, **Daniel Mandil**, [who later] became the general counsel of Sony Music. And after he'd been there for a little while he asked me, "Would you be interested in coming over here? I need a junior litigator."

I'm sure you thought, "What the hell do I know about music litigation?"

[Laughs] Yeah, you rarely see people moving from corporate law to music law. I knew nothing about copyright and trademark law, so I had to pick it up fast. I worked at Sony for a few years and then got the opportunity to move over to the transactional side. When I first started, I would wake up in the middle of the night and think, "Oh, my God... I drafted that section wrong and we're going to get sued!" Because I came from a litigation background, everything to me revolved around



lawsuits. But I really enjoyed it and loved the fact that transactional work was more collaborative and less about fighting.

And then you made the move to Epic in 2011. How would you describe your position?

I would describe it as negotiating deals, helping the label evaluate legal risks and advising on overall strategy. Some days, I'm negotiating deals with artists, producers, movie studios or brands. Other days I'm helping with an emergency or coordinating with other Epic departments on an artist initiative. The nature of this job is totally different from my work in criminal and corporate law. I'm not spending my time researching and writing legal briefs arguing about why a client shouldn't go to jail or why their sentence should be reduced. I'm spending my day figuring out deals.

One of the primary areas you oversee is brand marketing. To what do you attribute the explosion of artist branding over the last five years?

Right now, there's the impression that it's pretty easy for artists to record on their own and for artists to deliver music on their

*Left to right:
With Lynn Hazan and DJ Khaled; Yu, Rick Sackheim, Ezekiel Lewis, Camila Cabello, Joey Arbagey, Sylvia Rhone and Roger Gold*

own. So what are we, as a record label, going to do to make sure we are providing value to the artists who are signed to us? I think that one of the major things we can do is provide guidance and help in licensing and the brand sector.

Can you talk about some of the artist deals you've worked on over the years? Let's start with Future.

Our deal with Future is probably the one I'm proudest of so far in my career. Right now he is on such a tear in terms of brand deals and hit music. He just released his ninth album, and it was the biggest album of his career. He's been an amazing partner to Epic and to Sony.

With Sackheim, Arbagey, Hazan, Lewis, Rhone and Paul Pontius

What about 21 Savage?

We did a one-night signing with Savage. I remember closing the deal at 3am and then catching a flight back to New York four hours later. It's been exciting to watch his career take off since then and to see his commitment to charity. His Back 2 School and financial literacy work is really inspiring.

You were also intricately involved in A Tribe Called Quest's 2016 reunion album, We Got It from Here... Thank you 4 Your Service. What was that like?

A Tribe Called Quest was one of my favorites growing up. When you work in this business you tend to become a little jaded because you meet famous artists all the



time, but when [founder and leader] Q-Tip walked into the room for the first time, I was totally starstruck. It was such a privilege to be able to work with Tribe.

You mentioned your previous work defending death row inmates. Was social justice a passion for you early on?

My mother was a real hippie, and she was always very focused on social justice causes when I was growing up. She would take me to feed the homeless and to marches. When I was in high school, I was president of the environmental club, president of the women's union; I was involved in all kinds of causes. I wrote my senior thesis at the University of Chicago on police responses to victims of domestic violence, which is something that has always been and continues to be a huge issue.

As a sociology major, I wanted to look at police responses, so I spent months at the police station reading domestic-violence reports and talking with cops about their experiences. I learned a lot. Victims are not always heard, and a great deal of that has to do with immigrants who can't speak English or who are afraid of cops because they might not have legal status. Social justice has always been a part of my life.

Given that your background is anything but musical, how did people in the record industry react to you coming onto their turf?

I feel guilty telling people how I got into this industry because so many people want to be in this business, and I was given an opportunity without looking for one. But this industry is made up of incredible people, many of whom I count as close personal friends. I think we all love to see artists accomplish their dreams and I feel fortunate to be a part of that.

Where did you grow up?

I'm an East Coast girl. I actually grew up in River Edge, New Jersey, which is very much a suburban town. We had a white picket fence, a dog and a cat. I grew up very fortunate, particularly given the fact that both of my parents are immigrants. My father was born in China and escaped when the Communists took over. My mother was born in what is now the Czech Republic, and she also escaped when the Communists took over there. My father came to this country when he was 26 and worked as a waiter. And then he ultimately got into computer programming.



There's no way you could get away with being a slacker in that household.

No way at all [laughs]. I've always been impressed that my parents were able to provide the life that they did for my sister and me. It made a huge impact, because it showed me that you don't just get things because you want them. You really have to work for them. I didn't grow up with parents who said, "Oh, you can do whatever you want." I grew up with knowing you have to work hard; nobody is going to hand it to you. You have to be self-sufficient.

Top: At City of Hope Spirit of Life event with erstwhile Epic exec Michelle Edgar, honoree Rhone and guest Michelle Hoang; bottom: with Rick Ross

Left to right: Brian Wilson, Rhone, Lewis, Arbagey, Sackheim, Epic EVP, Head of Marketing Dave Bell and Yu



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Was it a strict household?

It’s funny. My mother was much more of a free spirit. I originally wanted to be an actress. In addition to sending me to all of these social-justice things, she also sent me to art and acting classes. My father, on the other hand, would always tell me there are three jobs you can get: working in business, being a lawyer or being a doctor. You just need to pick one of them [laughs]. My father was not playing around. But I would have been a terrible actress—I was too self-conscious.

So are you still a Jersey girl?

I’m still on the East Coast. I lived in the city for a very long time, and then my husband and I bought a house out in a town called Brookhaven on Long Island. We were in the midst of building a house when COVID hit. So we moved to California for six months, and then we came back here when the house was done and moved out of the city. And so I’ve been out here in Long Island, getting back to my suburban roots.

How’s the new house so far?

We’ve been here for about a year and a half now. We got a Peloton bike and a dog. I’m really loving it. I like being closer to nature, having more room and being in a less noisy

environment. I love my dog. I’m obsessed with her.

What’s your earliest music memory?

My sister is six years older; I was very much influenced by the music she was listening to when I was younger. I was a competitive swimmer, and I remember she made me a tape. One side had the band *Squeeze* on it and the other side had *Yaz*. I remember being so happy that she made me something, because I looked up to her. I just remember listening to that on repeat at every swim meet.

What sorts of things did you discover on your own?

In high school I became an indie-rock fan. *Dinosaur Jr.* is one of my favorite bands. But I was also a hip-hop head. I was into Tribe, *Black Sheep*, *De La Soul*, *Wu-Tang Clan*, *DMX* and *Ice Cube*. I still have some of the CDs!

Do you recall specific shows that were important for you?

My favorite concert memory is going to see *The Beastie Boys* at *Roseland*. This was the *Check Your Head* era. I’m with my best friend and we’re way up in the front and the whole crowd is pushing against us.



Lewis, Sackheim, Yu, Rhone and Epic staff, 2019

And at one point **Ad-Rock** sees me jumping up and down, and I swear to God he pointed at me and smiled [laughs]. I'm going to keep that memory.

Women have been so integral behind the scenes in the music industry for decades. As a woman of color, can you speak to how much of a role model Sylvia Rhone has been for you?

Sylvia Rhone is a legend. When I first met her, I was intimidated, because she is so well put together. She has always been so incredibly nice and supportive. I really owe so much of the trajectory of my career to her. Sylvia has given me support and boosted me up even without me asking, so that's been incredibly important to my career and to my success. And she also gives me independence to make decisions. She has obviously had this incredible career, going from being an assistant to being the chairwoman of a major label, and it's really an amazing story. To have Sylvia as an example is a wonderful thing.

What is the most important thing you have learned from her?

I love the fact that she doesn't focus on how tough it was [for her being a woman of color]. She acknowledges it but she just keeps working. Sylvia Rhone leads by example. She just keeps bringing in the hits.

Where do you see yourself five years from now?

I look at one of my other mentors, **Julie**

Swidler, who is general counsel of Sony Music. She's just an amazing example of where you can go, starting off as a label attorney and ultimately becoming the global general music counsel of an entire music company. I would love to do something like that, not only be close to the music, but also to be able to look at a global company and understand everything that is happening across the world. I can't imagine all the things that Julie deals with on a daily basis, but that's ultimately where I would like to see my career go.

What's the best advice you can give to someone who wants to make their mark in the legal music world?

I would have two suggestions. First, the music industry is a small world, and it's very much about who you know, so meet as many people as you can—find someone who knows someone. People reach out to me often on **LinkedIn**, and as much as I can, I respond. I meet new people and have conversations with them. I will submit their resumes to places. So definitely put yourself out there.

The second thing I would say is to volunteer. That's how I ended up at Sony Music. I volunteered to work with a partner on a case that really nobody else wanted to work on, because it required a lot of travel. I volunteered to do it, and this is where I ended up. So you just never know where things will lead you. ■