



Stanford eCorner

Investing in Creative Talent

Cameron Strang, *Warner Bros. Records*; Nate Ruess, *fun.*

February 19, 2014

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/3284/Investing-in-Creative-Talent>

Singer/songwriter Nate Ruess talks about the process of being signed and developed by a record label, and Warner Bros. Chairman and CEO Cameron Strang explains his company's approach to artist discovery and investment, in response to questions from Stanford Professor Tina Seelig.



Transcript

At what stage do you start investing in artists and is maybe you can tell a little bit about how you were discovered and I mean you were really young when you first got your first record contract. Yeah. I was 18 years old playing in a local band in Phoenix and the radio station had started to play our music and major labels had caught wind of it and the next thing you know we're signing a big contract and when you sign a contract that's too big and you don't sell a lot about them, you end up getting dropped. And then I was re-signed by the same company about four years later in a different band which is, it's a very weird - I guess, just never giving up and I always had some sort of cult fan base to rely on which is an important thing. It's an important thing. You know, I talked about how it's easier to make decisions now after you've kind of made it a little bit but it's also wonderful to step out onto your own and I guess not be as reliant on the big companies. Though - but I think it took a lot of failing to appreciate what a company like Warner, whether it'd be the publishing or the record companies, can do for you when you are ready to - we're going to keep saying exploited which I think we need to just like - we do erase that word like absolutely. Yeah, yeah. Okay, I'm sorry. That's my fault.

That's my fault. So maybe you can talk a little bit about - Cameron, about at what stage you're looking for artists. Are you trying to find the folks who are in a small club or a coffee shop playing a guitar or are you looking for people who have a big fan base already online? Well, there is no real one recipe. So we are generally just looking for very talented people who, we think, will connect with an audience and sometimes they have big fan bases, sometimes they have small fan bases. I think one of the things about the company when a company as big as Warner is, we are dealing with all different types of artists. So to put it in perspective at the publishing company, we publish everybody from the Gershwins to Cole Porter to Radiohead to Lil Wayne to Nate Ruess to Jay Z and Beyonce and Katy Perry. So we've got a wide array of people doing a lot of different things. Some of them are current with huge fan bases. Some of them are historic with huge song catalogs. So, there is a lot of nuance to dealing with the various people.

But when it comes to finding talent and developing artists and investing in people's careers, we are looking for them at whatever phase they are at. I think sometimes we are very early and sometimes it takes somebody a period of time to be ready and to be in the place where it makes sense. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship, how much shaping gets done of the artist? One of the things I have learned about in getting to know the company over the few weeks is the term A&R How many in the room have heard of the term A&R Okay, a couple of people. Okay, this was a fascinating concept. Maybe you can talk about that process and how that fits into sort of working with the artist. A&R I mean, originally stood for artists and repertoire and really that's the part of the company that creatively works with artists and/or songwriters on the publishing side. But let's just stick to the record side. So that's the side that finds artists, that brings them to the company that eventually hopefully we sign a contract with the artist and then works with them too to get the recordings done to help them connect to the company in such a way that we can connect them to an audience. So sometimes again there is no-one-size-fits-all, sometimes the artists

are - have a very clear artistic vision and write and perform their own material.

And some are not songwriters at all but have an artistic take on music and how they - what they want to perform, so we may help them connect with songwriters or record producers or songs themselves that people send us. So there is a variety of things that A&R does depending on what the artist needs. One of the things that I have learned along the way is that it's actually pretty rare to be in a position like you, Nate, where you actually are a songwriter and a performer, that a huge number of people fit into one of those categories. You're either a songwriter or a performer and that's where this comes a matching. As a songwriter and a performer, what sort of relationship do you have? How much shaping do you get of your work or are you given a lot of artistic and creative freedom? A lot of artistic and creative freedom and then that's - I don't think I was going to sign another contract with a major label unless there was something that I was going to get, because, as Cameron mentioned, it's good to have an A&R for someone who might need a little bit of shaping. But I look at a lot of artists and if I am critical I think like oh well they could use a little bit of A&R in this department or that department. I think for us, we're a confident bunch. I had made - I had seen the problems that I had had in the past. Artist development is a very crucial thing and it's not something that necessarily happens a lot these days and I think that that's why we are seeing a lot of bands just come and go or artists just come and go; they don't get an opportunity to develop and I think that we - through the trials and tribulations to where I am now, when we had written and recorded that last album, we didn't have an A&R because it was - we knew what we wanted to do, we were very - like we'd have a specific goal but that's usually not the case. So usually, artists take full advantage of these type of resources? I mean if - yeah, they can be helpful.

I had A&R on my first album on a major label 10 years ago and it was just a disaster. You know, like people talking to you about the songs that you're writing as a - I think as a band member or as an alternative musician or something like that, you look at it a little bit different. I have written songs for other artists and it's been set up by A&R people. Those songs probably wouldn't happen if it wasn't for A&R whereas I am not looking for any outside help in song writing. So I don't need that. But when you hear like from an A&R guy and he's - what did he say? - when I am making - when I was making my first album, I was about 19 or 20 and he was "you know what, it just needs to be a little bit more high octane." It was just... I'm not going to cuss. Otherwise, we have to label it explicit. There's good A&R and there's bad A&R. That's true in everything, right? Good A&R doesn't use words like exploited. Well we were talking actually earlier today, we were talking about the good ideas and the bad ideas.

So maybe there is good A&Ring out of bad A&Ring.