

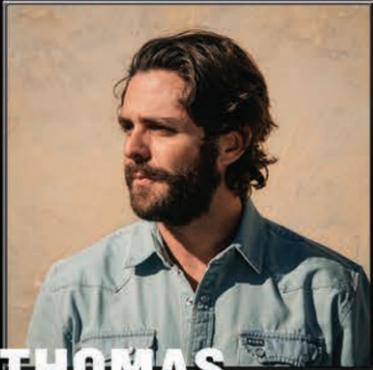


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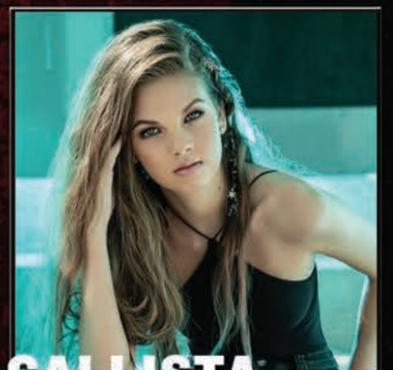
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# MACHINE

## Scott Borchetta & Team

**B**ig Machine Label Group President/CEO Scott Borchetta should be on a beach somewhere. After selling his company to Ithaca Holdings in 2019 for a reported \$300 million, he could probably build his own island from loose change. Instead, company executives and artists paint a picture of someone who may be more engaged than ever in daily operations. As the company rounds the corner on 15 years, the continuing development of artist careers, the emergence of a winning publishing arm and a stable of flourishing brand extensions speak to the continued focus of BMLG and its leader.

"The move with Ithaca wasn't about the end of Big Machine; it was about the next chapter of it," Borchetta says. Of particular importance to him was looking his 118 employees in the eye. "There have been sale rumors forever, and I repeatedly told the staff that if we ever do this, it will be for the right reasons with a company that understands and supports who we are, leaves us alone and is simply a great partner."

Almost two years in, Borchetta believes he found exactly that in Ithaca's Scooter Braun. "Scooter and I talk a couple times a week but, operationally, nothing has changed."

The business at large, however, has seen tremendous change. Keeping up keeps Borchetta energized. "We continue to be students of the game, and it's changing so fast," he says. "I still have an incredible desire for us to be successful. There's more to do."

**Hoop Dreams**

Technology has clearly remade the landscape for artist development and discovery, and EVP/A&R Allison Jones is on the front line of BMLG's work in that area. "Scott and I both use our gut," she says. "I still fall in love with an artist who has a unique vision and voice — their voice along with strong work ethic and hit songs. There's no replacement for those things, but these platforms have been a great trampoline for artists who want to make the most of them."

A near-complete shutdown of the live music business accelerated the importance of online platforms. "Quarantine changed Avenue Beat's life, because they decided to develop a fanbase on TikTok and it worked, as it did for Noah Schnacky," Jones says. "That doesn't work for every artist's narrative, but at least they have a tool for taking their career in their own hands when they can't book themselves and do gigs the way FGL did."

Adapting to global musical upheaval has led the label to facilitate other development, as well. "Mike Eli had never really done home demos," Jones says. "Out of all of our artists, he's now the one that's killing it with Zoom writes and home demos. And the vocals he's recording at home are better than any he's ever done."

Jones is also enthused about the growth of her team. "We have a lot of extremely talented young people with amazing ideas and hustle," she says. "We've still gone to writers' nights — in COVID compliance — and looked for artists, but they've also been scouring social media. You can't replace the intangible star thing you feel in the room, but we also need this new generation that is savvy on all the platforms."

Building a roster with depth and versatility is a point of pride. "Five years ago, Thomas Rhett was on the cusp of becoming a headliner, and today he is Entertainer of the Year," Borchetta says. "Florida Georgia Line with their ACM

Decade Awards, obviously, dominated the last decade. I'm proud of all of our kids but look at how Eli Young Band continued to carve their own path and have a very successful career 20 years in, and the same with Rascal Flatts."

Being at a point where artists have been in the fold for a decade or more isn't lost on him. "Justin Moore has been around for 13 years, we're coming up on 10 years with Brantley Gilbert and nine years with Thomas Rhett," Borchetta says. "They are pillars of the company. Then you look at the success of Brett Young, who's become a staple. Someone like Tim McGraw gives you gravitas and great interest — an asset for our publicity teams to represent superstars. How are you going to use that leverage, break new artists and create new superstars?"

The 2018 departure of Taylor Swift for Universal is also part of the process, as Borchetta indicates. "I often compare BMLG to the Lakers," he says. "Whether it's Kareem Abdul-Jabar, Magic Johnson, Kobe Bryant, Shaq or LeBron, we're always going to have superstars. Having that superstar power combined with making sure we always have a deep bench is a key ingredient to our continued success."

And Borchetta is as involved in coaching that talent as ever, at least as Carly Pearce tells it. "Last year was very difficult for me in losing [producer] Busbee and my relationship failing," she says. "Scott was very hands-on and quick to tell me to close the chapter on an album we put out in February. He said, 'I want you to go onto new things and dive into what I know you are, which is a real artist who writes real songs. I want you to feel the things you need to feel, and I'll be on the other side of the mountain for you.' I don't think a lot of people at his level care like that."

For Pearce, the connection with Borchetta is about sharing a mindset. "When 'Every Little Thing' came out, I got a lot of attention and labels were quickly like, 'Wait, you have a song now!' So, I was taking meetings. Busbee and I met with Scott, who I'd never met, and he knew the song was selling. It was a fine meeting, but it wasn't a sign-you-immediately reaction. And I really wanted to be at Big Machine, because I felt connected to the A&R team there."

"I was getting ready to send Scott a thank-you card for the meeting when a girlfriend suggested I invite him to the video shoot for 'Every Little Thing.' Having been independent the whole time and doing it all on my own, I'd set up the video myself. So, he came, looked around and said, 'You did this on your own? Nobody helped you?' I was like, 'Yeah.' The next day, he took me to lunch and offered me a deal."

"The reason I love that story is he didn't buy into the song, even though the song was doing something for people. Instead, he bought into the underdog, someone

who wasn't waiting around for a record deal to get things done. I think he saw a lot of himself in me."

**You've Got Mail**

Not unlike the roster, the executive ranks are a mix of long-tenured pros and fresh new voices. "A lot of the same people are still in place, but they have tackled completely new challenges," Borchetta says. "When we started this thing 15 years ago, we were still the young guns. Now there's some younger executives who are doing really exciting, interesting things, and I learn from them as much as they learn from me."

The 2017 restructuring that led to the closing of Dot Records also offered lessons ... and growth. "Even though there was real success with Zac Brown Band and Maddie & Tae, it was one-too-many imprints for our internal math," Borchetta says. "It gave some great executives new opportunities that didn't exist without the creation of Dot, including three of the best promo execs in the business — Kris Lamb, Michelle Kammerer and Bill Lubitz — who have all risen in the BMLG family."

Facilitated by the rise of streaming, among other factors, the label group's business is more global than ever. "We have our own team on the ground in London that does real business for us," Borchetta says. "Same in Toronto. As much as we can be a global company with the music we represent, we are. I'm so proud of the job the ex-US team does. It's really the envy of the industry, because we were ahead of the curve."

Perhaps the greatest success in the last five years is the development of publishing arm Big Machine Music. "We always wanted to have a publishing company and thought it would be a nice module that would run alongside us," Borchetta says. "Not to take anything away from what we wanted it to be, but the vision [BMM GM] Mike Molinar had and what he has built ... we're only seven or eight years old, but we're a top six publishing entity nationally, all-genre. The songs of the year we have — '10,000 Hours,' 'The Bones' — our publishing company is hauling the mail."

**Daydream Belieber**

"Publishing companies take a while to get off the ground, but if you do it right you will see the cascade of activity we've had," says Molinar. "And if you're really lucky, you end up with a year like 2020 where there was activity on almost everything. We were the No. 2 country publisher — beating Sony/ATV, Universal, BMG and Kobalt. That's not going to happen every year as an independent, but it's been good."

He credits Borchetta for understanding what success would take. "The mistake most labels make when they set up a publishing entity is focusing first on it being there to feed and service the label," Molinar says. "That compromises a lot of decisions you make with talent you're trying to attract."

Molinar was clear with Borchetta about his vision. "We're going to be an independent music publishing company that happens to be aligned with a record label," he says. "We'll have some eyes in your organization, and you'll have some eyes in ours, but Allison isn't forced to cut my song." Likewise, Big Machine Music wasn't forced to hold their best songs for the label.

"To Scott's credit, he got it," Molinar says. "If someone writes a particular type of hit song, and Big Machine doesn't have that kind of artist in their recording cycle but another label does, we can't pull that song back. We'd be doing the writer a disservice."

While the CEO may have understood, it took a beat for other companies to get there. "We had trouble getting labels to see us not as their competitor — not as Scott



Mike Molinar



Allison Jones



**Full Speed:** Borchetta waves 'em around at the Brickyard; cheers Tim McGraw's return at CRS; toasts Thomas Rhett with George Briner; celebrates with FGL's Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley – as well as Jimmy Harnen – and opens the Big Machine Neighborhood at Monroe Carrell Children's Hospital in Nashville with Rhett, Rascal Flatts, Sheryl Crow, Sandi Spika Borchetta and Carly Pearce.



# LEARNING

## Open A New Chapter

Borchetta,” Molinar says. “One time we took our writers to play for a label, and no one showed up. They sent their most junior person. One of the songs we played that day was ‘Guy Walks Into A Bar.’ Within the next couple of days, we were doing a publisher crawl at Loser’s and our writer, Jonathan Singleton, played that song. Tyler Farr was there and asked to hold it. Somehow, it got back around to that first label, and they asked to hold it for a big artist. Obviously, Tyler got the song. That really changed a lot of the tone around us as a publisher.”

If that changed the tone, 2020 changed the volume. Molinar, BMM VP Alex Heddle and writer Jessie Jo Dillon got a preview of things to come. “A bunch of us were in New York for different reasons, mainly the AIMP gathering in June 2019,” Molinar says. “Riding in a cab, we heard ‘Speechless’ and sent a picture to Dan + Shay, who replied that they were in town as well. We met up later that night. Dan + Shay had just recorded ‘10,000 Hours,’ which Jessie Jo is a writer on. One at a time, Dan took us up to his room to hear it and, right before he put the headphones on each of us, he said, ‘By the way, Justin Bieber is on it.’ We were freaking out and then, of course, rocked it out until the wee hours. I was on a panel at 9am, still feeling some Irish beer.”

### Value Proposition

Publishing is only one way the Big Machine world has grown in the last few years. Starting with Big Machine Vodka, brand offshoots now extend to whiskey, rum and, of course, hand sanitizer. “I didn’t know a thing about this when I started it, but I was interested and asked questions,” Borchetta says. “What are the foundational things we can do to continue growing a deeper bond with the brand? People aren’t usually bringing a physical piece of music into their

homes, so when they bring one of our spirits home to use as part of a celebration or just to enjoy in downtime, that attaches in a different way.”

Working with alcohol led to the sanitizer spinoff. “Early last March, a friend sent me a note about a distillery in the islands that started making it,” Borchetta says. “My brother Mark runs the distillery for me, so I sent him a note. His team deserves all the credit for understanding WHO standards, determining the recipe, sourcing the bottles and everything else. It’s a really good product and immediately became a real business for us. There have been a lot of Johnny-come-latelies jumping in with junk product, but ours is going to survive beyond this moment.”

A lifelong love of motorsports now fits even better into Borchetta’s world. “They’re all connected,” he says. “I’ve always had some kind of Big Machine moniker in racing but, honestly, it was more of a vanity thing. Now we can have Big Machine Vodka, hand sanitizer or other products on a car.”

Started in 2015, Music Has Value is also a passion project, but in a different way. “Streaming was starting to become prevalent, and the message was, ‘We’re going from making dollars to fractions of pennies, so educate yourself,’” Borchetta says. “I literally started wearing it on my sleeve; people would ask, and it was a perfect intro to the discussion. That grew when we began having conversations about making it mean something more than just a grenade in a still pond.”

The first of 15 \$10,000 grants marking BMLG’s anniversary have been made to five non-profit organizations. “Our focus is music education, but it’s also music therapy,” Borchetta says. “If you’ve ever seen the documentary *Alive Inside*, you see people who’ve been bottled up inside themselves in rest homes come to life when they hear music for the first time in years.

“Most of us have probably gone through those cognitive

issues with someone they know, and we went through it with Glen Campbell,” Borchetta says. “We did his last recordings, and he came to a release celebration at the Country Music Hall of Fame. I went up to his wife Kim and asked how he was. She said, ‘I didn’t think we were going to make it. He was trying to take his clothes off, trying to get out of the car – it was insanity. But as soon as we pulled up and he saw people, cameras, lights and fans, he came to life.’ He put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘How are you doing?’ He may not have known it was me, but he sensed it was someone he knew, and we talked for two minutes. That was the last conversation I had with him.”

### Light House Keeper

Looking ahead, there’s likely even great change on the horizon. The connection to Ithaca Holdings is part of that equation. “Plugging into Ithaca gives us access to so many other incredible content makers and places we can connect our music, whether it’s our gaming arm, 100 Thieves, or the things we’re doing with Bitcoin,” Borchetta says. “We’re really plugged into what I’ve always wanted to be – a pure entertainment company. Of course, we manage the biggest pop artists in the world and have access to players in other spaces who are equals. We can get them on the phone, get them engaged and move a lot more content.”

BMLG’s core business is also likely to evolve. “The next five years is about being nimble and understanding what my artists and executives need. When we do this again in five years, I think we’re going to look 50-60% different. The most dramatic changes in the business are right in front of us.”

What may not change is Borchetta’s drive and involvement, according to those close to him. “I went through the transition away from Dot and of Scooter Braun buying the label with him,” Pearce says. “The industry has changed a lot, the company has grown, he’s brought Tim McGraw onto my imprint and, still, it has felt consistently the same. Scott is a constant.”

McGraw, of course, returned to the label for a second time, as announced last year at CRS. “I love the passion that Scott Borchetta and the entire Big Machine team bring to the table,” he says. “Across every part of the label they have really dedicated executives and are great partners in taking the music we make to our industry and the fans. I have tremendous respect for this label and am proud to call it my home.”

Molinar says the team-wide work ethic comes from the top. “After the first night of our online retreat in December, I told him I could see how much work he, personally, did – not that he handed off to somebody. Pen to paper, writing and planning his vision, then taking the action steps for it. When you think about large companies and all the things a chief executive is dealing with, then add in the effort, time and vulnerability it takes to do that, it speaks volumes.

“It reminded me of when I was first hired and learned about the light in the window. There was one office you knew if the light was on, Scott was still there and working – like the queen being in Buckingham Palace. There was a year of my life when my wife went to Johns Hopkins for a clinical internship, so I worked late a lot – 9pm or 10pm regularly. And every night, the light was still on when I left. I never beat him. That’s a company leader.”

Over five years that have been, arguably, the greatest period of transition since Big Machine’s launch, Scott Borchetta has kept the light on. “As long as I’m in this, I’m going to compete at the highest levels,” he says. “To do that, I don’t see how we can slow down. When I’m done, you’ll know it, but there’s way too much to continue to figure out on a daily basis.” But, he says, “I still go to the beach.”

CAC



Ashley Sidoti

## REP IT OUT

Heads of promotion for BMLG’s three imprints share a winning memory from the past five years.

“One of the brightest for us was Thomas Rhett being crowned ACM Entertainer of the Year,” says Valory VP/Promotion & Digital Ashley Sidoti. “It’s a moment that most artists dream of, and the promo team behind them dreams of that moment alongside them. Launching an artist’s career takes a village, and there is nothing more rewarding than seeing all that hard work and talent recognized. We could not be prouder of TR and our Valory team!”

“Five days prior to servicing a single we had chosen from Tim McGraw’s latest No. 1 album *Here On Earth*, Big Machine GM Clay Hunnicutt told me about a very special song Tyler Hubbard wrote while quarantining on his tour bus from a positive COVID-19 test,” says Big Machine SVP/Promotion Kris Lamb. “The song’s message and the passion from McGraw, Tyler and Scott made the pivot at radio easy but also scrapped our ironed-out plans for the previous single. We got to work immediately and constructed a strategy with the potential to break records. The rest is actual history as ‘Undivided’ impacted with 152 adds, becoming the most-added single in the history of Country Aircheck. There’s nothing more gratifying than watching the highest level of execution from a team you consider family.”

“In April of 2016, our team went for adds on Brett Young’s first single, ‘Sleep Without You,’” says BMLG Records SVP/Promotion & Marketing Matthew Hargis. “The moment our team started his launch, we had immediate reaction from fans, listeners and programmers. In addition to his incredible talent as a songwriter, vocalist and performer, Brett’s competitive background with athletics was another huge weapon. We walked into every situation with the mindset to win every room with the music while creating lasting relationships with Country radio and fans. Since then, all of Brett’s six radio singles have gone to No. 1. We’ve taken time to stop – often with beer in hand – and proudly reflect as a team, but we’re always looking ahead to the next challenge and the journey to that victory. We look forward to celebrating seven-for-seven by taking ‘Lady’ to the top in the coming months!”



Kris Lamb



Matthew Hargis