

House *in* Development

Eyes & Ears Lead Big Loud's First Five Years

“We just deliver the message; the A&R department deserves the praise,” says Big Loud Records VP/Promotion Stacy Blythe who, though understating her department's role, makes a salient point about a successful first five years (see sidebar). Born out of the publishing company of accomplished songwriter Craig Wiseman, the label is indeed rooted in a creative-first mindset. But as partners Seth England and Joey Moi – and 2017 addition VP/A&R Patch Culbertson – tell it, they've had to learn a few things, too.

“I remember my first trips to Nashville, originally as a songwriter,” says Moi, who had produced multi-platinum albums for Nickelback by then. “When I met these guys, I realized how like-minded we were. We had the same dreams but knew we would be able to occupy completely different corners of the room, with the ability to work as one unit very effectively.”

“Each of us did something a little different,” says England, who started at Big Loud Publishing in 2008. “From the day Joey, Craig and I started partnering on stuff, we did production deals – which is record deal-like. We developed things. Joey was developing rock acts then would partner with record labels. We all think the music we make is as good as the last one, therefore any lack of success is credited to the record label that messed it up.”

“At that point, you're hands-free,” Moi says. “You watch it go, hope another record and recording budget comes back around and lands in your lap. As you get older and keep doing that, you inch forward wanting to hold onto it more and more. We just kept doing that as a group and wound up in this dream scenario.”



Grand Scene: Seth England, Morgan Wallen, Hardy and Chris Lane (l-r) at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

Adding recording and marketing to their already wildly successful artist development work – Florida Georgia Line, for instance – meant adding staff ... and risk. “It was a little scary to start, but you get the first No. 1, then the next one,” Moi says. “You sign the next artist, hire the next employee and it keeps growing. Before long, it's a snowball, and you're running after it to keep up.”

Today, Big Loud employs more than 40, though the core executive group has changed with the departures of former label president Clay Hunnicutt and partner Kevin “Chief” Zaruk. “Some days it seems we're catching up with growth, others it's trying to get ahead of where we think we'll be in six months,” England says, noting the importance of structure along with that growth. “We found

BIG LOUD
RECORDS

it crucial to have some protocols and systems in place. Not restrictive, as in every act has to do it the same, but making sure the village is all speaking the same language, looking through the same filters, making decisions together and all buying into the order of artist development then, ultimately, radio promotion and marketing.”

WAY I TALK

Perhaps no surprise in a song-driven town, but the philosophy driving Big Loud is anchored there. “There's not just one simple mantra,” England says. “A big song can launch an unknown name. A small song can kill a big name. It really does come back down to that. Drake can put out a turd, and you'll see it. People would like to believe huge artists are bulletproof, and it seems like that when they're in their hot zone, but that's just not true. Historically, everyone's arc starts to come down, and there's no one reason, but my opinion is the songs soften up a bit.”

Meanwhile, the addition of Culbertson evolved – or maybe added to – the creative approach. “I was at Republic and knew the partners because of the Florida Georgia Line deal,” Culbertson says. “How they prioritize the song was a very different mentality in terms of artist development where oftentimes you're signing stuff that has momentum. I completely understand that methodology, but being particular about the song – putting your best look forward – was unique. It's kind of that mini-Motown, where some of the best writers in the format, if not multiple formats, and fantastic voices are together in a pretty brilliant system. Expertise, all those sets of ears, marketing genius, Joey on the production side – having all that in-house is invaluable.”

Experience also played a role in that evolution. “We've had hiccups, like any company,” England says. “We missed on a single and had some tough conversations. I remember the three of us sitting in Patch's office trying to figure out how to never let that happen again.”

“We have to make music with gut and ears, but then react with our eyes,” he continues. “By contrast, a lot of

labels will load up with add dates and plans before they know the first thing about their record. Patch has been a great balancing influence in this area. Joey and I can get so sure of our gut in the studio that we extend it to the team – run, run, run! I like that, but getting focused means reacting to data and having protocols in place to tell us when the right time to go is.”

Culbertson adds, “Musical development runs in parallel with audience development. When you're just starting out with an artist, the rooms they play get bigger, and gauging success changes. We've dropped larger projects and studied how audiences react to each song individually and had a couple of surprises even against our own gut instinct. That's part of the game.”

FIXATED

Putting together the roster involved calculations that exceed the song, however. “When I first met Joey, I was in that Nashville publisher mindset of experiencing the ability of a song to lift up a pretty average artist,” England admits. “But the song-only train is short-lived. His wisdom to Craig and I was to slow down and find real special artists. He had that experience – certainly Chad Kroeger has one of most amazing, cool voices.”

Moi's insistence on seeing certain traits became ingrained in company thinking. “Voice doesn't have to have a big, powerful range, but it's got to be something identifiable,” England says. “Also, best case scenario, they could be drawn as a cartoon character. Tim McGraw and that classic hat – you can see just a silhouette and know who it is.”

“We listen to hundreds of artists before we align,” Moi says. “We look for that signature voice. Hopefully they've can contribute to their songwriting and their own creative development. Are they passionate about entertaining on stage? When it all comes together, you pair them with great songwriters, it moves in the right direction and feels good. We can usually get there. The song does most of the heavy lifting. That's true. You can put an average singer on a great song, and you're off to the races. But when you get that trifecta – powerful voice, cartoon character persona, ability to create – and tie it onto a great song, you've got a tidal wave.”

The losses are generally tacked to too much gut, not enough eyes. “There's a silver lining in each one, though,” Moi says. “We learned to not make that decision again. That's how I learned to be a stickler for a voice. I had invested months of my life and time into somebody who just didn't meet all the requirements and I didn't know that at the time. You take the ‘L’ and move on to the next one, building that frame of reference.”

I WAS JACKED

Fortunately, and by design, there have been many more notches in the win column, and this anniversary has afforded time for reflection. “The scoreboard moments



Seth England



Joey Moi



Beer Me: Celebrating Hardy's "One Beer" are (top, l-r) Ali Matkosky, Tyler Waugh, Devin Dawson, Hardy, manager Tracker Johnson, Seth England, Dave Kirth, Sarah Headley; and (bottom) Stacy Blythe, Brittani Koster, Lauren Alaina, Nikki Wood and John D'Amico.

No Less Than Crazy

Led by VP Stacy Blythe and National Ali Matkosky, the growing Big Loud promotion team isn't likely to let silly things like convention get in the way.

"I remember being on the road with FGL in Raleigh," says Blythe, who was at then-Republic Nashville. "Seth called and said, 'We're thinking about opening a record label. It's kind of crazy, but I'm going to send you a couple of songs and want your opinion.' He sent four Chris Lane songs. I got through 'Fix' and was like, 'Woah, this is not going to be easy at Country radio.' Then I got to 'For Her' and knew I had to be part of this."

Told the label was fully funded for five years, Blythe made the leap. "We had five years to make something

happen," she says. "Having worked with Seth, Chief, Craig and Joey on FGL, I knew they thought differently, everything they did was with integrity, and I just loved being around them. We were fast friends."

Joining two years ago, Matkosky had the benefit of seeing the already-formed label ... and its unusual approach.

"Coming from a different format, I didn't know all the ins and outs of how all the label promotion teams do business," she says. "My husband, however, is a publisher, and Hardy is one of his writers. I'd had one meeting with Stacy before the No. 1 push for Morgan Wallen's 'Up Down,' so I started really monitoring that battle. He was getting real team feedback from Hardy – a co-writer – and talking about how impressed he was by the creative promotion tactics. We were up until midnight watching the chart close; they won by 72 points. I remember thinking, 'Holy cow, I have to be part of that!'"

Fueling that victory, at least in part, involved

getting Morgan Wallen on a countdown show with its attendant additional airplay. "You can't host Lon Helton's *Country Countdown USA* unless you've had a No. 1, so Morgan wasn't able to host the week of that push," Matkosky explains. "But Florida Georgia Line had, of course, and they are featured on the song."

Blythe takes over: "I called Lon and asked if Morgan could host *with* FGL. He said no one had ever asked that question before, but, 'Yeah, I guess technically he can.' Brian Kelley was in Florida, and we couldn't get him up here, so I said, 'Give me a mic; I'm going.'" Matkosky: "Stacy flew down to Florida with a microphone to record the FGL guys for the countdown, allowing

Morgan to also host with Lon. Most people would have said, 'Well, our artist can't host. That's it.' Not her."

"That's the Big Loud way," Blythe says. "There's no option to do less than crazy. Yes, it's going to take a lot of extra time and energy, and of course I'm going to

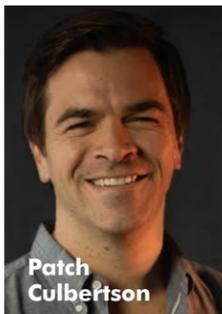


Glasses Always Greener: Celebrating "Whiskey Glasses" are (l-r) writers Ben Burgess and Morgan Wallen, producer Joey Moi and writer Kevin Kadish.

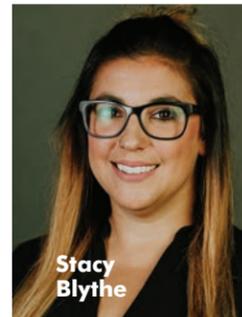
like No. 1 parties are great, but if it ended right now, those aren't the memories I'd hold onto," England says. "My favorite memories are getting a text from Joey or Craig saying, 'What are you doing? Come hear this. I remember walking into Craig's writing room after a text like that and he says, 'Get a cigar and fuckin' check this out!' It was 'Boys Round Here.' Joey brought me down to the studio to hear Chris Lane's 'I Don't Know About You.' Same thing."

Culbertson focuses on the live performance payoff. "What I love about the A&R process is once you start putting out music with an artist, you see those rooms build," he says. "There was a climactic moment this past winter with Morgan onstage at Bridgestone opening for Luke Combs. The way he was commanding that arena audience, knowing the development from 200 people at Stagecoach to that ... a surreal, out-of-body moment for me."

Collective energy is high on Moi's list. "Seth gets a lot of credit for this, but I find it almost magical the assembly of people we've brought together," he says. "Even before the record company on the publishing side, it's really been neat to watch this little family come together. We're over the 40 mark and everyone occupies their own space. I get excited every day to hang out in that office, and I miss that dearly right now. "The building is like a bio-feedback device too," he continues. "I get to turn a song in and then walk around



Patch Culbertson



Stacy Blythe

ROSTER

Ashland Craft
Chris Lane
Ernest
Hailey Whitters

Hardy
Jake Owen
Larry Fleet
Mackenzie Porter

Madison Kozak
Mason Ramsey
Morgan Wallen
Sean Stemaly

No Less Than Crazy

do it. We don't take a lot for granted, and we were going against Blake Shelton. That's the situation when you're breaking new artists against established artists. You have to get creative."

That kind of determination goes back to the team's launch. "When we went for adds on Chris Lane's 'Fix,' our first single, we took a risk with a very different sounding record," Blythe says. "We had 73 first week stations, which was a **Country Aircheck** record at that point, and the payoff of a lot of blood, sweat and tears. All of us, including label president at the time Clay Hunnicutt, were in a van for 20 weeks setting this up.

"I remember staying in some pretty shitty hotels,

including an Extended Stay America in Philadelphia where Chris Lane pulled the covers back and it was just infested," she says. "He was like, 'Are we past this yet? Can we please stay anywhere else?' It's funny looking back on what we did to get by, knowing that five years of funding came from a few guys and their personal cash."

Like the creative side of the company, Big Loud promotion has learned a few things. Morgan Wallen's debut single, "The Way I Talk," was one of the teachers. "It ended up being a top 30, but we stepped back and said, 'What are we missing here?'" Blythe says. "We just started paying attention to what the fans were running to. It's not a big, secret formula. It was going to a show and watching which song had the most phones in the air."

Armed with music they believed in and trusting audience reaction – ears and eyes – the messaging is simple. "We have a brilliant

A&R department," Blythe says. "I recently told someone, 'Hey, we just deliver the message. It's A&R that deserves the praise.' The promo team just spreads the good work. I tell them, 'I just want to go to bed feeling good about what we do every day, so let's just go out there, deliver the hits and be good to people. If you do that, they'll be good back. If you're honest, they'll be honest back. And have fun.'"

"We're a people-first company, and the Big Loud partners protect that culture. We look out for our own, and I'm not just saying it because it's my

current place of employment. Really, I've never worked in a better environment, and I think that matters as much as the music. We all are happy to be here and want to work as hard as the next person so we can celebrate another win. I don't think it's a secret, Big Loud likes to party. And man, we celebrate every win like it's our first."



Ali Matkosky

to see how people are responding. Next thing you know, there's a big marketing meeting going on and people are drawing things on a wall. You can just sort of see it happen when you've got one." As for the next five years, Big Loud has big, big plans (sorry), and that song's story is also revealing. "We just finished a Chris Lane marketing meeting where he told us he was going to propose," England says. "I went into the studio, and Joey was at the control board and was talking to [Big Loud writer/artist] Ernest about what just happened. I said, 'Damn, we need a "Die A Happy Man" for Chris right now.' And Ern goes, 'I think I just wrote it,' and plays part of 'Big, Big Plans' off his phone. I'll never forget



Getting Along Famously: Craig Wiseman (r) with Mason Ramsey.

just sitting there looking at him going, 'Hold on, don't finish that, we need to get Chris with you.' How can that happen? If we didn't have that creative part of our building, those fun little moments wouldn't." Sorting that creative energy into a promotion and marketing plan might be the trick. "Sean Stemaly and Larry Fleet have absolute smashes, which is a good problem," England says. "Our radio promotion team is figuring out how to scale and grow, which is intimidating in one sense, because we do have primarily unheard-of artists. On the other hand, they know they're going to battle with something different. Next year, the name of the game will be adding a few more names to the roster of artists while maintaining what we've built in the last five. In many ways, we're just getting started." **CAC**

Volume 15, Issue 2, September 2020



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