



# NICK BRENNAN

# I WANT A GIRL



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Mediabase Callout

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in Just 3 months

2019 CRS New Face

#1 Canadian single

**BBR**  
MUSIC GROUP

**STONEY  
CREEK**

**BMG**

# Jon Loba

## Working A Real Job

**S**cheduling this interview with BMG/BBR Music Group EVP Jon Loba has been more than a year in the making, but he's had a few things on his plate. First and foremost, BMG's January 2017 acquisition of BBRMG has set in motion a series of changes and challenges. Happily, he and his team are in the midst of a two-week No. 1 debut single for Jimmie Allen as he sits to discuss more than two years of transition, the industry's biggest issues and a new venture with the group's biggest artist.

**You knew this would all land on this week a year ago, right?**

Yeah. (laugh) As soon as the BMG deal closed, I said we are not signing any solo male acts for probably two years. Our format needs more solo males like a hole in the head. And I really wanted to send a signal that things were different A&R-wise. And then I get this postcard across my desk of Jimmie, went to a showcase and thought, this guy acts like he's been on arena stages for 20 years. You could see it right there.

We had him in a couple days later to play acoustically, and it gave me chills. We dove into his story, and he had me in tears. I'm like, "This is it." I wanted to sign him so bad, but I had said earlier that the staff would have input. Not A&R by committee, but everyone would at least have a voice. So we waited and brought him in for the entire staff to meet and hear. My phone was blowing up with texts from everyone on the team saying, "We've got to sign him!"

**Glad to have the acquisition mostly in the rear view?**

When EMI and Universal merged, I remember seeing [UMG/Nashville Chairman] Mike Dungan several times, and it just looked like he was walking around in a fog. When this deal closed, he brought me back to that and said, "Get ready. It's going to be cloudy for a while." There's so much to do with getting the pieces in place and merging two cultures. Luckily, we had spent so much time trying to find the right partner that the culture transition was actually really easy. BMG really did hold the same values BBR did.

They put artists first, care about staff development and truly want to improve lives through music.

So it was really natural. But between finding a partner, due diligence and putting the pieces in place,

## THE INTERVIEW

it's been two-and-a-half or three years. It wasn't until February or March of this year that I felt like things were really starting to click; that I could once again be really proactive in looking – not just at the operational side of the business – but the creative side. I've always been very much in those weeds and got away from it. Now I'm diving back in more and more. I like being close to the staff and having those minute-to-minute conversations.

**What's it been like going from, basically, a mom-and-pop to a corporate structure?**

That was the most stark contrast. As BBR, there were years we only put out one album. When we started talking about P&L statements after the merger, there were several employees who asked what that was. We just never talked about them. We just made music and when it was time to put it out, we did. We didn't worry about product flow. There were advantages to that, but there could also be disadvantages. Maybe we should have moved sooner on certain projects.

With BMG, we will always give artists and their music legitimate shots, but we had to empower the staff and make them believe they could run fast enough for a much more aggressive release schedule. When the deal closed, [BMG/U.S. President] Zach Katz told me, "Look, everybody expects 2017 to be a transition year. This will not be a year of transition." (Ed. Note: Katz announced his departure from BMG as this issue went to press.) The numbers [BBRMG Founder] Benny Brown forecasted – and I love Benny and his ultimate optimism – but they were based on every single thing hitting perfectly. I just told Zach, "You may as well fire me right now." Luckily, like so many people throughout my career, he had more belief in me than I did. Zach had confidence this team would get there and, somehow, we made the numbers in 2017 and are well ahead of schedule for 2018.

So, you're right, that was the biggest change. Making budgets, sticking to them – all those things made us better, more thoughtful, strategic and efficient. And that's paying off for the artists, too. They have more certainty and a team that's operating at a much higher level than it was two years ago.

**What parts of the transition feel settled and what parts are still being sorted out?**

For a long, time people were expecting mass layoffs and changes that were never in the plan, [because] a big part of BMG's purchase was for the employee infrastructure we had. What became evident after last year was that our partners – radio, DSPs, press, retail – wanted more focus. It was the one conversation that continually came up when I asked those who really move the needle about our weaknesses. Four imprints didn't allow for the focus they wanted and needed.

Closing Red Bow in July was a really tough decision, but it was the right decision. I immediately felt the staff settle. Like, okay, this is done. Our promotion teams have been strengthened and are able to focus in a way they never have before. Looking at airplay, you can draw a straight line from that moment to some records really starting to perform. We got some things through that I'm not sure would have made it prior to our consolidation.

What's not totally settled is the maturation of our A&R team and process. Jimmie was my first signing since the acquisition and there have been others, but even with established artists you'll see a difference. When a consumer or our partners think about BBR/BMG, I want them to think they may hate or love what we bring to the market-



place, but they know they're going to be moved in some fashion. It's all part of building our brand as a label group that's pushing boundaries. We're fortunate enough to do that because of the success of Jason Aldean, Dustin Lynch and others who have pushed the envelope in their own right.

**Prior to BMG, the A&R process here centered on Benny, right?**

[SVP/Promotion] Carson James and I could work around the edges. Benny left me alone with Dustin because I brought him to the label and that was really my baby. Beyond that it was Benny and two or three really good producers he felt comfortable with. A lot of times we'd be hearing music right before we were supposed to run with it. Carson and I would get a preview and we could maneuver with him, but he'd tell us to zip our lips. I would say, "Benny, we're three forty-plus white guys making all these music decisions. Let's use our staff as a resource!" He did here

and there, but I wanted it to be a much more organized process where everybody had a voice.

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We stole [VP/A&R] Sara Knabe from BMG, so right away had a very strong, capable female in the day-to-day song search and creative conversation. We wanted to build up that department even more and she was smart enough to seek someone to balance her. She said, "I'm female and a little bit more country leaning, I'd like somebody who's male, a little more pop leaning and a little bit younger." So we added Chris Poole and they're the yin and yang of that department. We're also bringing along Benny's nephew Josh Brown, really grooming him as part of that nucleus.

**You're on all the major boards and looking at the big picture. How are we doing?**

When Taylor was white hot in the format, that absolutely raised all boats. I always wondered what would happen when she either cooled or focused on another genre. She had so much awareness and pop culture heat, but the valley after her from that standpoint is much shallower than I thought it might be. That's probably because there's so much exciting new talent, but also because of the growth of streaming.

The lack of females in the genre is obviously an issue and I'm often asked to comment or criticize the lack of opportunity given them by programmers. More clearly and earlier than ever, we have the ability to see when music is connecting, so I find myself defending Country radio at every turn on that point. And maybe I'm wrong because I'll even have some programmers tell me we need to stick with female artists even when the metrics aren't there. Work to change opinions and give these artists a chance to move the culture and connect. On that front, I don't know what the solution is, but I do know we haven't had enough music that's connected in those early metrics.

Other than that, we'd love to see streaming growth accelerate even further, but as the consumer becomes more educated about streaming and our artists continue to cross genres, that will be there. So I'm insanely encouraged. Somebody asked recently if I'd be interested - given the opportunity - in running all genres at BMG. My response was, not a chance in hell. I love this genre and where it's going. We're in a really special time because we're not the only ones taking chances.

**You have a number of highly placed female executives, but the roster is probably more reflective of the gender disparity you referenced earlier. We discussed this at length in our February 2015 article "Women In Country," but what's the proper balance between pushing for change and giving the audience what works?**

I would love to say there's a formula for that. With respect to this company, I get a lot of credit for hiring and elevating women, but that's never been a goal. It's just that in all those cases the strongest candidate was female. And maybe because we've hired more women, when we grow and promote they end up in leadership positions and absolutely crush it. [VP/Marketing] JoJamie Hahr is like my right arm and, without her, I'd have a lot less peace in my life.

With respect to artists, when Benny was in charge of A&R, he did recognize the difficulty of breaking female acts so it made him much more hesitant to sign them. Going forward, you'll see us taking more chances. That will absolutely be a focus for us, especially after hiring Sara. All of us see that lane - it's an easier path to nominations, to TV and there's probably more of a story to tell. We're very focused on that lane. I have and will probably go to more female showcases than male showcases within the next year.

**Is it too easy for the creative community to scapegoat radio, saying we don't sign more women as writers and artists because the music won't get played?**

I think so, but I've never once thought, "Country radio isn't going to support a female so I won't sign them." Quite the opposite. There's less competition, the room is not as crowded and it should be easier. I had several people question Jimmie as my first signing considering the track record of black artists in the genre. To me, it wasn't a risk at all. If great artists with great music are given the chance to connect, they will.

**Coming out of the CMAs, a lot of people are wondering if the awards process is too weighted towards bigger companies. What's your view?**

One of the benefits of being on these boards is the peace of mind I get from seeing the process up close. I was the CMA Awards & Recognition committee chairman for a year and can now say the process is as pure as it can be. There are controls in place to prevent block voting and, when you really look at the overall number of members, even if the community could block vote and not get caught, there are enough votes out there to balance it out. It doesn't make it any easier when your

artist doesn't get nominated or doesn't win, especially when you have commerce on your side, when the [metrics] say your artist is better at connecting with the consumer. That's difficult, but I wake up now thinking about how to win over those other voters, not that the process is corrupt.

**The awards made a point of not being political or controversial, but still we live in a time when people we work with have been in life and death moments on the job. Does country music have any broader responsibility to the culture? Not necessarily in being political, but in reflecting the better parts of humanity?**

Music unifies and helps people escape. I think we move and respond correctly to what is happening at the time. Everybody is so sick of politics, so Robert Deaton and the team took that out of the monologue and they were dead on. At the ACMs earlier this year a statement had to be made about what happened in Vegas, and that was handled beautifully. We all care about this genre and our fans so much and, for the most part, we land on the right tone at the right moment. Going back to Jimmie, that's a signal to people who want to paint country music as a single-minded red state - maybe in some corners even racist - genre. We're not that. You don't have as big a record as he has without this industry and our fans responding to it.

**Country radio has seen some softness in ratings, particularly with cume drops of late. How is the format doing?**

The cliché is that the format is cyclical, but I think a superstar artist will emerge and lift all boats over the next few years. I absolutely believe that. I was really encouraged by a recent conversation with the head of one of the more conservative groups who said that their stations playing more variety were doing better. He told me country fans don't want to hear the same 20 songs, but we've been in a period of that. That gives me hope. Historically, when we open up to a new batch of stars, the format gets a lift.

**Am I wrong that Jason Aldean's contract is up for renewal?**

We have another album and, while I don't count my chickens before they hatch, I certainly can't imagine him being anywhere else. And I don't think he wants to be anywhere else. This is the house that Jason built, no doubt. At our pre-CMA party, I said that we are all here because of the walls he knocked down and the revenue he generated. That's what allows us to keep taking chances like the one we took with him.

When we really started the label, I'd preach to Benny about being small and focused. He agreed, but then out of the blue said we had to go see an artist - someone a couple other labels had dropped, who was playing at a venue that had some of the worst sound in town. I tried to put him off, but Benny said he's moving back to Georgia if he doesn't get a deal in the next week. I'm thinking, "Great, no commitment." He walked out onstage, I'm standing there with my arms crossed and at the third song Benny asked what I thought. I said, "I think we better run backstage and sign him before everybody figures out what they missed."

We moved really quickly, but I was scared as hell because "Hicktown" was so different. Looking back, that's where this company having a stamp for taking chances was born. Even after the success of the first album, the next single "Johnny Cash" was very rock. JoJamie came into office as we were going for adds, tears in her eyes because people were saying the song was too rock and Jason should go play with Metallica or AC/DC. I told her, "They're wrong. Our job is to get a read from the audience. Go do that." She and the team did, and the rest is history.

**What's the vision with Jason?**

I've never worked with an artist who at every step knows how to push the envelope, yet retain his brand. He's got some of the best ears and instincts in the business. When he turned in this last album, I called and told him

I don't ever want him to stop doing what he's doing, but I'd love to have him in our A&R department. A couple months later he called me back to ask if I remembered the conversation. He had some things he wanted to do, so we're getting ready to do a joint venture for him to have his own imprint. We'll use existing staff but let his ears and production run free. He's such a great song guy and really knows brands.

As much as I love him and think highly of him, that admiration went through the roof after Las Vegas. How he operated in those days, weeks and months, led his organization and took so much on his shoulders with such grace and heart - thinking about it makes me want to cry. He made it easier for everyone to deal with the grief by the example he set.

**You told a great story in our Power 31 issue about a lawn mower, investment banking, a Garth song and a career crossroads. That may have been the first time all those things shared one story. How did you get to a point where high finance and country music became your options?**

I've worked since I was 13 years old and part of the decision to come to Nashville was the realization I'd never just screwed around. I'd never done something only for myself. So I figured I'd play around in the music business for a couple years then get a real job. And now I wake up every day thinking how lucky I am that this became that real job.

When I was at Warner Bros., I'd been in the studio with Travis Tritt, helped Little Texas with custom liners, Faith Hill has just had a multiple week No. 1 and I was just buzzing. I was on an elevator with the late Eddie Reeves and label head Jim Ed Norman, and said, "Man, if I die tomorrow I've lived a full life." Eddie laughed and said, "That's why we hire young kids like you - to remind us how great this business is. Give it 10 years, kid. Your story will change."

He got off the elevator and I rode to the next floor with Jim Ed, who shook his head and said, "That's not true. If you love music and you love people, you'll love this job for the rest of your life." When I leave the house every morning, I think about Jim Ed's words. I love it now more than ever and I'm so thankful for that. **CAC**



**“ We had to empower the staff and make them believe they could run fast enough for a much more aggressive release schedule. ”**

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