

Clint Higham

This Business Is Personal

Starting as an intern at what was then called Dale Morris & Associates, Clint Higham worked his way up to being a partner with Morris in the renamed Morris Higham Management. Well known for his key role in the career of Kenny

Chesney, Higham has had a prime view of country's changing dynamic for more than two decades. Underpinning his insight into issues the genre faces is an understanding that some things – the most important things – don't change.

CA: You've worked with an artist management icon for a long time. How has the dynamic between you changed over the years?

CH: This has been my only job in the music business. I came in the door as an intern and eventually became a 50% partner with Dale. What I didn't know at the time is the value of a mentor. To this day, there's a friendship that is very much intact. He always wanted to be the best boutique company, and we're working to keep that as our centerpiece with our hands, personally, on every client we manage. We don't want to scale too large.

Music is a creative thing, and I don't care what business you're in, you have to change with the times. As we saw the business shifting and record companies changing, we started staffing up to meet those needs, because it was a little scary there for a while. The record business has since started to scale again, which is nice.

I'm a firm believer that 90% of what we do is the music and the song, and I don't ever want to get away from that. I surround myself with people who think that way and are listening for their taste in the music. You don't want to wake up one day and you've outgrown your own business.

As other managers consolidated and expanded into more traditional label functions, how did you balance that staffing need with the emphasis you place on keeping the approach more personal?

I can't be in the content business. We work for the artists – our clients are everything. You can't scale too large with satellite offices or various partners and be at it for 30 or 40 years. I have to be able to look my clients in the eye and have them know we're focused, not scattered, as we come alongside them and their life's work.

Selling Morris Higham's booking business to Paradigm late last year was a big change – something you'd resisted despite many offers along the way. Now that you're down the road a bit, how has it changed your view of management or the agency business?

The health of an organization is the key. We've always had an amazing culture, and I didn't want to bring in partners that shifted that. We love the culture Paradigm [CEO] Sam Gores and his

team have created. We wouldn't make a move like that with [MH agency heads] Mike Betterton and Nate Ritches shifting over if it wasn't a

THE INTERVIEW

better opportunity and bigger for our clients. I'm still talking to those guys daily, and it feels like a great time to be in the Nashville agency business.

We weren't an agency just to do it, we were an agency solely to service our management clients. At the point where we had 10-12 management clients, you have to ask, "Are we a management company or an agency?" It was beyond just working with Kenny Chesney or just Alabama, who are franchises. Now you're growing artists from a van and trailer or less. Looking at Old Dominion, it took a lot of focus from Nate to get them to all those levels. We couldn't do that as well with 10 or 12. This opportunity with Paradigm as our partner is an extension of what we're doing.

We've seen mentions of associations with Scooter Braun and Irving Azoff. Does Morris Higham have alliances with other management companies?

We do with Scooter Braun. Irving was a partner for a lot of years, and I loved working with him. When he helped merge Ticketmaster with Live Nation, he went back into private practice. We were independent for a while and Scooter came along. My good friend and colleague Jason Owen [with Sandbox, Monument and a partner with Braun] had to give the okay, because Scooter wasn't trying to be all things in Nashville, but it's been a really good partnership going on almost five years now.

He saves several steps in what I call the "Rolodex process," because he can get somebody on the phone I may not be dealing with on an everyday basis. Or he's playing with stronger cards in an area that could benefit my client. What doesn't change is I have to do the job in Nashville growing my artists from here outward. If I don't do that there's nothing any partner is going to be able to do in Los Angeles, New York or wherever. I'm keenly aware I have to mind the store here.

Congrats on Old Dominion's recent ACM win. What's that ride been like so far?

People say bands are tough because you have multiple decision makers in the process, but someone pointed out to me, "Well, you've got adults." And they are. They have a clear mission and focus. They're musicians and songwriters who know what it is to be hungry. We were turned down by pretty much every label in town, and I remember sitting down with them at that point, looking at their faces and hearing them say, "We were making it work before any of these showcases, and we'll continue to." I thought, if they can do that, I can stick with it. Most artists would fold in that situation – especially a band. But it's been textbook. We still have a lot of mountains to climb, but they have reinvigorated me.

You mentioned the roster growing. What's the right number, and how do you make those decisions on who to support and build careers with?

We're about as big as we'd like to be in terms of numbers of clients. When we sign somebody, we get involved at the most granular level, which is a longer process. A lot of people would call that the research and development aspect of it, but I love growing an artist from the beginning. My good friend [tour promoter] Louis Messina always says, "I only want to work with artists who want to work with me," and I share that philosophy. We have a new artist who just got a publishing deal, and we could be looking at about a four or five year process. About half our roster is in that place. When singles can take close to a year – and even though people talk about DSPs and other opportunities, which are real – you still have to have a terrestrial radio hit for most of what we do. There aren't many like Kasey Musgraves, and I applaud her doing it her way. But with terrestrial radio as important as it is and as long as it takes, we're where we want to be with the roster.

Moving Kenny from Sony to Warner Music Nashville is one of the bigger jumps we've seen in a while. What goes into that thought process as you're exploring options?

Well, Kenny's an artist who's played close to 200 stadiums and continues to be on top of his game. The records are the fuel for the engine and [WMN CEO John] Esposito has so much passion and excitement. Kenny needed somebody to come along with that much enthusiasm. He wants to make relevant records. He doesn't want to conform to fads or trends. Working with Espo and [Warner



CEO] Max Lousada has been invigorating. When Dolly Parton was ending her days at RCA, she told [label head] Joe Galante she loved and respected him, but “I need a new lover.” That was the case here, even with the pull of Kenny’s catalog being at Sony.

Did you learn anything from all of that?

No disrespect to Sony because I continue to work with them in a major way, but they went through a lot of transition. Joe Galante had birthed Kenny’s career; we went through a regime change and then a third with [current Sony Music Nashville CEO]

THE INTERVIEW

Randy Goodman. Kenny still has that fire in his belly to compete and win. I can’t call the decision anything more

than gut and wisdom. He just trusted John. All the labels in town can do the job for any artist, but who is going to bleed for you the most? And with [Warner execs] Cris Lacy and Ben Kline, as well, it was the perfect storm.

Over the years you’ve worked with most of the labels as well as a variety of artists. Do you have any rules of thumb for what makes a good fit?

Management is a lot like dating or being married: what might be right for one may not be right for the other. I tell any potential client I’m meeting with, “Hopefully you’re meeting everyone who has qualified themselves to see who you’re most comfortable having a relationship with. Who is going to fight hardest for you?” We’ve always worked on a handshake, and I don’t want any artist here if they don’t feel we’re doing our best and have their back.

Kenny just wrapped the arena tour. How was that adjustment?

Well, he loves the outdoors; it just goes with who he is. After several years doing stadium and amphitheater we’ve been missing a lot of markets that don’t have either. He called me from Oklahoma City after four encores just totally fired up. It had been years since he’d played the market, and the audience was cranked up. There were only 23 dates, but he’s glad he did it. Pivoting in and out of buildings, amphitheatres and stadiums is really hard from a production standpoint. It’s a long week. So it was good to get back to some places where it’s still large crowd, just in more of a contained environment.

Kenny has such a connection to his audience. In marketing or business meetings, he’s the best. A&R, he’s the best. There are a lot of artists who can do parts of it, but Kenny’s hands are on everything from the lighting to the video to, of course, his music. He grew into those shoes without one of those crazy records that gets an artist through the doors, but is then hard to live up to. He built it bit by bit and was maybe eight years into the process before we really started selling tickets. So when it came, he was ready. He’s been able to pivot a few times and keep going. It’s kind of crazy to wake up and realize it’s been 26 years.



How’s the rum business going?

Great. We’ll hit north of 200,000 cases this year; the benchmark to hit was 100,000. We sure learned on the job. It’s a lot more expensive than we ever realized, and it takes a village. We made some mistakes, but now we’re really dialed in. We’ve had double digit growth, and we’ve only been out for four years. They say we’ll be inside the top eight of all rums worldwide this year. We’ve got a record with a bullet, so to speak, just have to keep it going.

International seems so hot right now, but that’s been touted before in this town. Clearly, many artists have found success overseas, but the global country explosion has never really materialized. Is this more crying wolf, or is it really changing?

Honestly, I’m not convinced. From a digital standpoint, there are more opportunities for our music to grow, but culturally it hasn’t gone over like some genres have. Australia certainly offers a bigger playing field. You’ve got London or the UK, but I don’t think you go over there if you’re going to put a spreadsheet against it. It’s a longer term play. How that plays out? I’m hoping we see more upside. Artists [do best when they] go in from the beginning – Old Dominion have been three times now, and they’re seeing growth.

As you mentioned, streaming is beginning to change the financial dynamic for labels after years of decline. Does that shift the balance between record companies and managers?

I don’t know. People talked about the power being all with the manager, but we need each other, and that won’t change. I don’t want to be in the record business. They’re in the management business financially with 360 deals, but I look at the record company as our partner. Old Dominion were out playing even if there were three people, but we had a major league opportunity when [then-Sony CEO] Doug Morris signed us out of New York. And you can just look at what’s happened in four years. You couldn’t script that, and Sony’s been a good partner. Our missions complement each other. I’m in the career business, and they may be in a fiscal year or a three-year cycle before it goes to catalog. I don’t see them in an adversarial way.

As labels make more money from streaming, does the 360 deal become less prevalent?

I hope so. Right now, you’re trying to grow the pie together. It’d be great if they could be scalable on their side alone, but the label business is coming from a different, smaller place. We were down to just Walmart and Target. Now you have DSPs, Pandora, SiriusXM – it’s a lot of small pots starting to scale.

Stepping back from the trees we’re all chopping, how healthy is the forest? How’s country doing overall?

Country will be around forever. There’s always the tension with pop and country – back to Glen Campbell “By The Time I Get To Phoenix” and Webb Pierce “There Stands The Glass.” Someone is going to come along in that traditional space, bust it wide open and make that cool again.

Sadly, we’ve cut the middle class out of the music business, and songwriters are working in silos. They’re becoming managers, parts of a production company, signing writers and artists, curating records and putting all their eggs in one basket. Kenny writes, but also wants the town to write for him. But some of those wells have dried up.

When I came to town, a writer could get one cut a year on a Reba album and make enough in mechanical royalties to keep writing and not work at PetSmart. That’s not reality now, so I don’t blame songwriters for going to that tribal model. But if you’re not one of those, where do you find your tribe?

We spend a lot of time and are way more involved in A&R as a management company. We’re connecting with songwriters, publishers and producers at a much earlier stage. I used to get calls from record companies about artists they wanted us to meet who were launching in 30 or 90 days. Now, by the time they’re signed to a label they’ve already got their team. To compete, we’ve got to be doing that as well.

What’s the best part of the job? What’s the toughest part?

The hardest is when music doesn’t get an opportunity to find out if there’s something there or not. I’ve never seen the chart this crowded, but there are still only 10 slots in the top 10. If you’re going to get one, you have to take it. If the song and artist are good enough, but don’t get that shot, it breaks my heart.

The best is taking an artist from totally unknown to seeing the public react with, “Yeah, I like this dude.”

Being at a live show and watching music affect people where you can tell it’s in the fabric of their lives – that energy exchange. That’s the best.

When did you know music was going to be that important to you?

I became a country fan when I was nine or 10 and started working in radio in my teens. I found out there was a school for this, moved to Nashville and had Belmont music business professor Bob Mulloy scare the hell out of us that there were no jobs. It became real for me. “How do I feed myself?” Back then, you practically paid to have the job, but there was nowhere else I could go, because there was nothing else I wanted to do. I was in the right place because it was my passion. And it continues to be.

I’ve never felt like I made it. There are more mountains to climb and I like the competition. I like to see others win, but I love having our team – our family – at the peak. Looking back at when Kenny started winning, I don’t know if I was having fun because it was so 24-7. Now, I’m having fun. I care about Nashville and our format. It’s important to me. Charley Pride helped Ronnie Milsap, and Ronnie said, “Well, I owe you a bunch.” Charley replied, “No, just pass it on down.” Dale was such a generous mentor to me, and that’s what I want to be to other folks.

CAC

CONGRATULATIONS
COUNTRY RADIO HALL OF FAME
2019 INDUCTEES

KYLE CANTRELL JEFF GARRISON
MAC DANIELS GREGG LINDAHL
BOBBY DENTON CHARLIE MONK

