

## **Rob Stringer** **CEO, Sony Music**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Rob Stringer, chief executive of Sony Music Entertainment. During his 30-year career he's worked with some of the top names in music including the Clash, George Michael, Bruce Springsteen and David Bowie. Most recently he helped launch Harry Styles' solo career and oversaw the release of Adele's 25 and Beyoncé's Lemonade. Prior to joining Sony in 2001 he led both CBS and Epic Records, and will shortly receive the Music Industry Trust's award for his outstanding contribution to the industry.**

**Rob, thank you for joining me.**

Nice to be here.

**So, Rob, before we started the recording we make a bit of chitchat, and as you know, I live in Buckinghamshire. You're from Aylesbury, originally. How does a teenage punk fan from Aylesbury become one of the biggest players in the global entertainment industry?**

That teenage punk fan was from some article in about 2000, actually from 1994, and now I'm never ever cast as a teenage punk fan.

**You don't look like punk rocker now!**

Well, no – it's 40 years later! But I come from Aylesbury, which was then back in the 70s was a market town, and I think honestly the whole reason that I got into music after my younger years listening to Radio 1 and listen to kid's television, was that we had an independent record shop in Aylesbury, and we had a club which basically ran every Saturday night, run by the promoter who also owned the independent record shop, and they put a very great band ever on. I mean, literally, it was a mile from my house, and in '76 and '77 I saw Blondie, The Ramones, The Clash, The Talking Heads, Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers, The Jam... before I was old enough to go, and I did get turned away first of all when I was 14 because I was too young, that was to go and see The Stranglers and The Vibrators, and I didn't get into that – but I got in with a dodgy membership card to see Eddie & the Hot Rods about a month later. But basically before that, David Bowie had played there six times, he played

Ziggy Stardust for the first time ever at Aylesbury, so for whatever reason this small market town had this one...

### **It was a hotbed of the music scene!**

Yes – and they had this one guy who was a focus point for the sort of musical education of the whole town, and so therefore it's... I don't think it's coincidental that so many people in the music business come from Aylesbury. And also my chemistry teacher at school, at grammar school, was the guy who ran the door – so he employed us all when we got to be 17-ish, we all worked at the club. So for whatever reason – I mean, again, I was rubbish at chemistry and so I didn't learn anything in chemistry, but luckily this guy got me to work at a rock club, and that was one of the first experiences of working within music. And it was a mile from my house.

### **And did you decide at that point, “I want a career in music.”?**

Oh yes, I knew. I mean, without sounding like a precocious brat I was reading the NME and Melody Maker when I was eight years old. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I mean, I've talked before about starting with Junior Choice and listening to every record on Junior Choice and listening to Radio Luxembourg on a transistor radio under my pillows, realising I had no musical talent whatsoever really, and then literally from then on in I've just soaked everything up like a sponge. So I knew I wanted to do it. I didn't really have any clue how I was going to do it, but I knew that's what I wanted to do.

### **So you just said then yourself, you had no musical talent. So did you know you would be an industry figure, that you'd be an exec?**

Yes. Well, I mean, I was in sort of rubbishy bands when I was 14 and 15 in somebody else's garage, but I didn't perceive I was going to be an exec. The next step after being in Aylesbury was that I went to Goldsmiths College, which is an arts college in south east London. I did my degree and I became social secretary there, which meant I booked all the bands and organised all the parties and all the events. And that was a route into the music industry, particularly in the seventies, less so once Margaret Thatcher got into power and cut all the Student Union funding. But I was probably the last years of that in '84, '85 so the route in was to be a booking agent. But I'd put bands on for 15 months and I'd done that job, and then I saw an advert in this in a student union newspaper that said 'Wanted: graduates with experience of university entertainment'. And that was basically me with anything else qualified for. But basically that advert was like Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, like a gold ray lifting from this student union newspaper.

### **Who was the advertiser?**

CBS Records. And it wasn't being arrogant, I knew that I was going to get that job. I knew that I was qualified to do that, because it just said exactly what I was qualified for, despite the fact I wasn't qualified for anything else. I was qualified for that and I knew I was going to get that job. Once I saw that, I mean, it was exciting, and I went for two interviews, and I started at CBS Records in '85 as a graduate trainee – not

that that meant anything, because I don't think they had figured out what I was going to do really – but I ended up sitting at my friend Jackie's desk, and she's still in the company 35 years later and so am I. So I sat at the end of her desk, and after about a month they sort of said, "You can be a marketing assistant." And so that's how I started. That was 32, 33 years ago now.

### **So what was the next rung up on the ladder?**

Well, in those days the record industry was really still growing. I mean, it was between vinyl and cassettes and CDs. So there were a lot of record companies, so there was a lot of fluid movement, and I just moved up. I went from being an assistant to what was called a product manager which did the marketing for bands, then I started to work with bands and have my own projects that I worked with, and then I did that for about four years and then I decided to move into A&R because I wanted to be much closer to the music, so I made that decision when I was like 27, 28.

### **A&R stands for 'artists and repertoire', doesn't it? I know that, I'm cool. What does the job involve?**

It's ancient terminology. I think it's a terminology that goes back to the Beatles in 1963 or something.

### **I know what A&R does obviously, but just for our listeners who don't have a clue. I'm hoping you'll believe me...**

Well, A&R would be basically looking after the recording output and development of artists. So the front line. So that's why I wanted to move from the marketing job I've done for about three years, four years. I wanted to move because I thought that was the closest to being on the front line. And it was on the front line – being an A&R man has as many clichés as you'd expect. It's lonely and it's schizophrenic, and it's slightly odd, and it's slightly egotistical, and you're insecure and all this – but you are the one that's closest to the music. And I wanted to take that gamble, and I'm very glad I did it because it taught me what I think is the most difficult job in a record company. And it's the most rewarding job but it's also the most difficult, you know, because it's singular. It's like being a golfer, a tennis player, in that you can't blame anybody else; if the act doesn't work then everybody blames you. So it's not as much of a team sport as some of the other roles in a record label.

### **Who did you work with? Are you able to name names? Was it a bit like never meet your heroes, or was everyone a joy to work with?**

No. I mean, some people are easier to work with than others, but most people were pretty good. I moved into A&R at Columbia – which was the label, and we changed from being CBS to Columbia – and at that time I worked with Alison Moyet and Paul Young and Deacon Blue. The first band I signed, which was lucky, was the Manic Street Preachers, so they were the band that really I bonded with the closest and actually, 27 years later, were still extremely close. So I worked with an array of things, and it was a bit like being chucked in the deep end because obviously a

couple of those guys were huge global artists, you know, and so I learnt quickly – or I failed quickly – and as I said, the results are quite public because everyone has an opinion of a record, you know, it doesn't matter whether it's your family or your friends or someone in the NME or someone on the radio – people have got opinions. So it was going in the deep end, but it was the right thing for me to do I think.

**Can you detach the artists themselves personally when them from their music. I mean, you mentioned Alison Moyet. I'd listen to one of her tracks, All Cried Out, she was on my playlist in the car on the way to the station this morning. If you actually know Alison Moyet personally, does that does that add to your enjoyment of her music or does it slightly detract from it?**

No, it doesn't. I don't think it detracts... I just think you listen to it in a different way. I mean, obviously artists, that's what they do and you have to be very cognisant of the fact that that is their whole life, and so therefore you have to be incredibly sensitive and realise what you are dealing with. And it's incredibly difficult; my admiration as I've got older has got greater and greater for that process because artists put themselves on the line every day and it's them, you know? You're not hiding behind a character, you can't use your team, and you can't use anybody else to shield behind. You are absolutely out front and you have to justify yourself constantly. So I learnt that, and some of the artists that I've worked with over the years I've become extremely friendly with – but I'm also aware of the artistic boundaries and also where you don't cross the line.

**What is the line? In terms of getting too personal?**

Well, I don't think it's being personal. It's just understanding what someone needs because it's their life and their career. And you can't be as flippant as you could be with someone when you're dealing with a mate down the pub who's just joking about what they did in the day. You've got to be very careful because everything that happens as an artist is sort of magnified somewhere. It's like everything is larger than life, and that's hard to balance. And I and I have huge respect for the people who have managed to balance that equation out for 10, 20, 30, 40... I mean, we've got artists on our record label who have been signed to the company for 55 years, so I've got huge admiration for that ability to make that balance work for them.

**Because not only are you incredibly vulnerable if you're kind of standing on the stage singing your heart out to a song you've written, but also it's quite precarious as well, isn't it, in terms of history is littered with bands who've had two or three good albums, and then the label drops them and then they're still going after all these years in obscurity, because success itself at that level is very tenuous.**

Yes, it's brutal. And the word you used, vulnerable, vulnerability is part of the reason why artists get known in the first place, because they put their artistic vulnerability into words and music, and then the public hears it. So yes, as I've got older my respect grows more for that process. And I've had those conversations with many artists that are famous and many artists that actually didn't work, and I understand that vulnerability even more in hindsight because I've had artists I've worked with

who had tremendous success and didn't enjoy it at the time, and I would go back to them. And at the time I might say to them, "You really should enjoy this, it probably doesn't get any better than this." And the reason the art was as good as it was is because they weren't enjoying it. It's a bit like the sort of Vincent Van Gogh painting in an attic, you know? Those records weren't from enjoyment; they weren't from a party that they loved, they were from pain. And so that process I am incredibly cognisant of when I'm dealing with artists. I mean, listen, it is a very precarious career. I mean, if you have several hits, you could probably have a long-term career, particularly as the whole business gets more mature... nostalgia is actually a big part of the music business now.

**I was in Pasadena a few weeks ago and I went to see Tony Hadley, and to be honest he was brilliant.**

I mean, I worked with Spandau Ballet on *Through the Barricades* and *Heart Like a Sky*, the album after that. And I keep in touch with most of them as well.

**I'm not sure they're keeping in touch with each other.**

Which is really sad. Because the fact is, that when they got back together and they did those shows, they were definitely better than they'd ever been. But again, it's very difficult. And Tony's doing good I think, he does make money. And he deserves to. Because first of all, him and the band, and obviously with Gary being the songwriter, I mean, they wrote a lot of good records. They had a lot of hits. So I'm really glad that there's careers for them, I think it's great. I mean, I think it's great when... the most heart-warming stories are always somebody that wrote a song 35 years ago, someone covers it and they make millions of dollars because the publishing pays, and someone hears a song in a completely different way – and those are the best stories we have. But yes, I mean the good news is if you have several hits you can have a career. One hit, more difficult. And as we both know, the record business and chart history is loaded with one-hit wonders, you know? Sometimes they had one idea, sometimes they had one song. I mean, that's frequent too.

**I don't know why Kung Fu Fighting has popped into mind, but that to me is the ultimate one-hit wonder.**

I think he had a second one though, and I'm really trainspotty about songs really... there was definitely a second top 10 hit from Carl Douglas. You're too young to remember Carl Douglas, aren't you?

**No, I'm really not. I use Oil of Olay quite extensively. I've aged well.**

You know, *Kung Fu Fighting*, was like a production team, a guy called Biddu, who worked on those records and he also did the Tina Charles record *I Love to Love*.

**The best feedback I get on Twitter about these podcasts is when I introduce obscure references. I did a Back to the Future II reference a few weeks ago and I got a few tweets from that.**

Let's go for it. We could do the whole podcast about one-hit wonders.

**Let's do it.**

I can probably give you several facts back and we can have fun.

**Let's do a separate one-hit wonder podcast. You heard it here first, people!**

I'm up for it. Yes, I mean, unfortunately, from a very young age the detail fascinated me, so you can put a pilot record on and I can name it in three bars.

**Do you think we commoditise artists too much as a society? Like for example we mentioned Tony Hadley. I saw him live. As I was going to the gig – now I'm thinking about him as a person, not as an artist, because you've reframed how I'm thinking about him – but when I was on my way there in the Über, I thought, "I hope he does all the Spandau hits, a couple of modern ones and maybe one or two token songs that he's written that he wants us to hear." I thought, "I hope he doesn't do like three Spandau Ballet hits and then 10 of his latest stuff, because I'm not interested in that." My thought process there wasn't about him as an artist or as a person, it was about me selfishly just wanting to hear what I wanted to hear as if he was some human jukebox. So I'm guilty of this myself. Do we commoditise artists where I think, "You might have stage fright," but I didn't even think about that. I thought, "When's he going to do Gold?"**

Yes, well I think that's a natural human reaction really. I mean, there's a really great sketch on that show Big Train that Simon Pegg did where Ralph McTell's doing Streets in London and then he introduces another song and he goes, "It's about fishermen in Cornwall," or something, and the whole audience, a guy drops his pint, and just people start saying, "Streets of London. No! Streets of London!" and he's just done it. And he's trying to do this song about fishermen in Cornwall and he goes straight back into Streets of London and people cheer, you know, thank God he's going back to doing Streets of London, despite the fact he just did it. I mean, yes, it's a human reaction to want to hear the things they want to hear, because people have songs, they have memories, they remember when they got married, they remember when they met their boyfriend, their girlfriend, they remember the time they were driving down a street and they heard the record the first time, so I understand that. I mean, artists understand that parameter. Some artists don't necessarily adhere to that, I mean, Bob Dylan, who's one of our greatest artists of all time and is really Picasso really, you know, the set list isn't dependent on being a human jukebox at all. It's like I think he plays what he wants to play, and I think for the most part of his audience goes with him.

**Well, they have to, they've no choice.**

They've no choice. But he's a legend. But they go with him.

**He didn't turn up to collect his Nobel Prize!**

I think he went and said hello to the people eventually.

**That's the level you want to be at.**

You can say nothing... I mean, I went to see Girl from the North Country last night at the Old Vic, which is a musical with his music interpreted – it was spectacular. I mean, obviously he's a different level. But for the most part I think that it's a balance artists have to make. It's like we have Depeche Mode signed to us, and Depeche Mode the other night played Madison Square Garden. And I think, quite rightly, they did five or six songs off the new record in the first half the set. Second half of the set was mostly hits, but the first half of the set... their attitude I think probably is they're going to go on the road for a year and play this show in arenas and stadiums around the world. They want to play new songs. And I completely concur with that. But the second half of the show was hits galore, and it was great.

**So how did you move from A&R into becoming a kind of... are you a suit now? What would you describe yourself as? Let's carry on the journey.**

Oh, phrase, suit! That's another cliché.

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Haha! Yes, I'm wearing a trilby and a three-piece suit here. No. I mean, that's fine. I mean, listen, all the clichés about the Spinal Tap like references for record labels, a lot of them are true, you know, not all of them. I get people saying to me all the time, "What we'd like to do is we'd like to come in your label for day and do a documentary," and I'm like, "I BET you would!" Because they would take all the normal, mundane detail, the diligent, disciplined bits of what we do, and then they put the daft bits in and then we'd have a record label that looked like a sketch show. I mean, I'm an exec now, but I'm trying to instil the principles and the foundation of the right thing to do into the people who work for me.

**A love of music.**

A love of music, yes.

**You're a business but it has to be done from a place of passion.**

It has to be done from a place of passion, a place of purity and a place of understanding the artist's difficulties in doing what they do – and that's very important to me. And hopefully maintaining a relationship with the art still, because if I didn't maintain a relationship with the art, then I don't think I'd be very happy really. I think I'd be a bit miserable.

**What makes a great artist? Can you listen to a record and think that's going to be a hit, even if you don't like it? Can you disconnect from your own subjective analysis and say, "Well, I'm not a One Direction guy but he's going to be big."**

Yes, well, I think What Makes You Beautiful is a great record. So when that was the first single from One Direction you go, "Okay, well that is a great record." I mean, I remember hearing that. I knew all about the record, and we had it and everything, but I remember hearing that in America in some like two months before it came out in America I remember hearing in some trendy shop somewhere and I thought, "That just sounds great. That sounds like proper timeless pop record," so yes. I can detach myself but you can't like everything. I mean, that's impossible. It's human taste. You can't like every single record you ever hear. But I'm able to distinguish between what's good and what's not hopefully. And hopefully – although you get it wrong quite honestly more times than you get it right – what's a hit and what's not. And that's not easy to do. And as I said, the strike rate on that isn't 80%, the strike rate on that's probably, if you're lucky, 20%.

**The music industry has changed so much. I can remember when I was a kid listening to the chart show, the top 40. Mark Goodier, or even Bruno Brookes, counting down and with my thumb hovering over the pause button on the tape so that as soon as Bruno stopped speaking, and I wished he'd just shut up, so that I could just get the whole song. But nowadays it's all Spotify playlists. I mean, for example, I listen to 6 Music. They have a 6 Music playlist on Spotify where it's exactly the same that they're about to play for the next couple of hours but without the guy talking in the middle. And it's the same curation, but do I want a DJ in the middle of it or not.**

Yes, well I think it depends if you like the DJ, isn't it? I mean, some of the radio stuff is okay. It's like, I like some DJs enormously and there's some DJs, particularly on pop radio, that I could I would turn down in the car in between, never mind taping it. I would turn it down the car and turn it back up, much to my teenage daughter's distraction. I said, "I'm sorry, I just cannot listen to that DJ." He's been to whatever boarding school they go for blandness on radio talking, so... yes. I mean, listen, I don't I don't think that's changed that much. I think the playlist you looked at on Spotify is replacing the chart rundown you'd have listened to when you were a kid growing up, it's the same theme. And people take the playlists very seriously on streaming platforms. I mean, those playlists are people's sound track, almost like the charts used to be our soundtrack. And the charts still matter. I mean, believe it or not the positioning you have in those playlists is extremely important in terms of getting people's attention span. You know, iTunes still has a chart that it's good to be in the top 10 of, and I don't think people take the charts seriously. I mean, I was literally... the charts used to run on a Tuesday – because I'm that old –

**Yes, Mike Smith used to do them.**

Yes. It was like 12 o'clock or something. And we used to stand in the playground at school and someone – not me, because I wasn't the funkiest person there – would



have a transistor radio, and we would listen to the rundown in the playground, and it was that exciting.

**I remember it being that exciting. Now, no one cares.**

Yes. I mean, I think a number one single particularly has tangibility, I still think that matters. By the way, it matters to artists. Even I'm of the frame of mind sometimes going, "Well, yes, it's going to be number one." Particularly with albums. "It's going to be number one," but it will be number 11 next week. They still want the number one album. So the number one single does mean something still.

**When you get to the level of Ed Sheeran, it's not just that he's number one, he's got 38 places of the entire top 40.**

Yes, but I think he takes that very seriously, Ed Sheeran. I think he's competitive and I think he looks at those charts, and it that does matter to him. It certainly matters to some artists. I mean, Taylor Swift, it definitely matters to. So that scale of detail is important to a lot of artists.

**Has the nature of what a record company does changed over the years, given the Internet? I mean, if you were to believe Justin Bieber's origin story it's that he was discovered on YouTube and blah, blah, blah. That used to be part of what the record company did, was that you'd have people at local gigs discovering artists. You'd sign them up and you'd make them millions.**

Yes. I mean, it's always that... the way artists are signed, some of them extremely conventional still and it could be 1958, it could be that, and then some there's a much more modernistic way of signing them. I mean, look, we've got to adapt the way we do things. We had an element of control when the business was first starting probably all the way through to the last chapters of the CD era – we were in control. We're not so much in control now. I mean, distribution isn't controlled by us. We used to make plastic discs and put them in plastic cases and send them off from our factories and distribution plants to record stores, so we controlled the process. We don't control the process now. The internet and post-Napster and downloading and then streaming, we don't control that. I'm not uncomfortable with that process, I actually like the fact that... to be in charge can lead to misuse of that power, and so for it to be a bit more egalitarian is a good thing. And as a result the way we discover artists is very different. And some of that information, streaming and downloads... we have a tremendous amount of data information now so we can tell very quickly if a record's happening in a small town, we can tell if a record's happening because of a Spotify or Apple playlist – we have a huge amount of data. So the way we look at what's happening is very different to what might have happened even five years ago, never mind 50 years ago.

**So can you still make the big bucks now? Because you can actually self-publish to Spotify now. I could film my own video of me on the guitar and stick it straight on YouTube and collect the royalties myself.**

You could.

**I mean, obviously I'd be terrible.**

No, no, no. I hope you make millions with your guitar playing on YouTube! Please do. But no, the ability to do that is there. Having said that, it's incredibly crowded and... we used to run a kind of passport control and go, "You've got to send a demo tape into a record label," and that is not as prevalent now. But the fact is that there are a lot of people on the Internet. It's crowded. So to be seen and heard on YouTube is not easy. You've still got to have something that's either, quite honestly, completely novelty based or it's got to be really good. So I don't think it's become easier to get signed to a record label. Now, the monetary system is different, and again we just had to get used to that. We don't control all the finance any more and people can make money doing themselves everything. I'm not sure that if you want to be a genuine, global artist that is harder to do that without people helping you and having a support system and an international system with a lot of people all around the world facing the same direction, I still believe in that and I think that that's still important. Because even though the internet covers the world and makes the world a smaller place, every market is different. Spotify is big in some markets, Apple's bigger in others, some radio stations are more important in certain markets. The way that music is consumed is extremely different in France to the way it is in America. In France, you can work a record for 28 weeks to get it to number one; in the UK it's three weeks. So there are a lot of vagaries of the difference, and obviously we have huge experience of those differences. And also we hope that we can lend experience and expertise to the process, and we have to rely much more on that expertise and experience now because it's much more of an open playing field.

**We mentioned Deacon Blue earlier on in the podcast. I bought Dignity on cassette single and paid £3.49 for it at Woolworths.**

£3.49? It wasn't that much, was it?

**Oh, yes. Cassette singles were quite expensive in the day.**

Very posh Woolworths. Knightsbridge or something?

**No, it was in York!**

Excellent.

**So I imagine there's a quid to Woolworth's, a quid for the production of the cassette single, and you're left with £1.49. I imagine you give 50p to Ricky Ross and his ilk, and then you get a quid or whatever. But with Spotify, what do you get? Like 0.01 pence per play?**

The equation's complicated.

**Is it because millions more people are paying that 0.01 pence?**

Yes, exactly. So we've got artists who on a song have done a billion streams. You know, so...

### **A billion 0.01s adds up.**

Yes. I mean, the economics of the seven-inch single in the 70s with you selling two million singles at whatever it was, you know, 50p a single, were pretty dramatic, the economics. And the royalty systems and the deals that artists had would seem prehistoric now, compared to what artists get paid now, so it's very different. And obviously artists' rights and the lawyers and the legal community have obviously wised up in 50 years, and so I'm very grateful we don't rip artists off the way we did probably in the 60s when the business was all brand new and people were figuring out the payments. I mean, there's lots of stories, I mean, whatever the Beatles merchandising was sold for was probably 10% or something and now would be 90%. I mean, everyone was learning at the time and it was entrepreneurs who were developing these systems, and write systems, and they've changed dramatically over 50 years. So the idea hopefully isn't to rip anybody off these days. That's not *my* intention anyway. But the metrics are very different. The metrics are very different from a seven-inch single where you sold two million copies to a billion streams that different measurements.

**And the nature of what artists do to get revenue now it's changed, has it not? Because there's me in the Über in Pasadena to see Tony Hadley, I listened to five tracks, and he gets three pence or whatever, but of course I paid \$40 to see him. And I imagine he gets quite a cut of that because there were quite a few several hundred people at the venue.**

Yes. Well again, I mean, the music business is extremely lucrative, and the record business, we used to be the people who paid people. I mean, I had a major artist tell me, who was a genius artist, say that... I said, "How did you manage to put all those great records out in the 70s in such a short space of time?" And one of the motivations was the starving artists; that we were the only people that paid him. So literally, they would put records out every nine months because that's how they got the cheque, because by the time they got to nine months they were broke, and to get more money they need to put a record out. And sort of starvation is a great way to find art. I mean, again, it goes back to a painter; a painter would sell his painting to eat.

### **No paintings, no Weetabix.**

Exactly. No paintings, no Weetabix. That's an excellent analogy. But the fact is that that's what happened. And we got less diligent about that process and we ended up probably paying too much money and having the wrong principles for why some of the music was made, and then all of a sudden with the advent of Napster and the decline of the CD and the question mark about whether downloads would replace CDs and whether digital was the new business, we suddenly became not the highest payers. Because arena gigs became very sophisticated, stadium gigs became very sophisticated, festivals developed. When I was a kid growing up as a late teenager that was probably four festivals in Britain. There's probably 50 now. And so the

monetary value of an artist now is much more dramatic than it was 20 years ago. I mean, dramatically different. There were bands, I mean some of the bands we talked about, that in that time it would have been a very different live business for them, and quite frankly they have all made a lot more money. I mean, you mentioned Deacon Blue. I mean, Deacon Blue were very big band for us in the 80s. I mean, that their arc would have been very different live-wise. But having said that, what Ricky did is he made a lot of records. And so actually, 30, 40 years later he has a legacy and a catalogue, so he can still play, because he made music. And one of the things I have to try and tell some other artists is please don't spend that long making moves that make you money on the road, that give you branding opportunities. Please will you go back in the studio, please make music – because in 10 years' time that's what will make the difference. A body of work. And in 20 years' time it will make even more difference. That body of work. So it's a balance, because it is easy to get rich quicker now if you are an artist. Much easier.

**And do you think in a way it's less about the music these days? I mean, I can remember back when Scottish pop was in its ascendancy. Ricky Ross had a bit of a reputation of being abrasive. Pat Kane of Hue and Cry seemed to turn a few people off because he was basically a bit of a bell end. Even though his music was great.**

(Sniggers)

**Whereas nowadays, people are much more interested in Taylor Swift's Instagram, her lifestyle choices, even more so now than ever. It's the product of the artist of which the music is just one part of it. Am I just an old giffer now?**

You are partly that, in the nicest possible way. I think that first of all it's matured. So when I was growing up you couldn't imagine your parents watching Star Man by David Bowie on Top of the Pops and remotely understanding what it was. Now, we all think we understand so we watch – especially me, because I'm in the business – but I'm watching something my kids who think something is exciting, and we understand it. That wasn't the case. So now, music is much more the soundtrack of people's lives. The idea that music's less important, I don't agree with that. Music was important to generations before, but the chances of your parents liking the same thing as you was unheard of. So it was always segmented. Your parent's liked, I don't know, swing music, and I liked...

**I don't mind swing music.**

Well, I don't mind it now.

**My 11-year-old niece got me into Revolver recently. She's a massive Beatles fan, and I didn't listen to it for 20 years. It was like, "Uncle Paul, listen to Revolver, it's one of the best albums they've done."**

And we need her in the music business. We need her in the record business. Those are the people we need in the record business, that are listening to Revolver when

they're 11 years old. God bless her. But from the point of view that I think music is more important than ever, but it's a soundtrack, and it's a lifestyle, and everyone has musical taste. I mean, that wasn't the case when I was a kid growing up. And so there is more money to be made, and there are a lot more people in the music business. It's become, as I said, a much more organised business, and therefore there's more money in it. And if you're more organised, there's more money to be made. And it is an extremely lucrative business. I mean, the live business. I mean, you can only explain the festivals, the growth of festivals, that's not an art-based thing, that's to do with money – and there are a ton of them. And presumably a lot of them fail because people are trying to raise the bar, but there's a ton of money. Branding has come into the business, there's a lot of money to be made from branding, but I'm still a believer sometimes that less is more, and my job is to make sure the recorded output is significant so that when we sit here in 10 years' time we can be nostalgic about a body of work by an artist and not just one song and a brand association and 10 festival appearances.

**Yes, because although I bought Kung Fu Fighting on seven inch, I've never listened to it since, whereas I still listen to the greatest hits of Spandau ballet. So the better the work is, it's more likely they'll repeat play it.**

Yes, exactly. And that's... I mean with the greatest respect to Carl Douglas, and I'm sure Carl's done great and I'm sure he's a good chap; he's not able to headline Wembley Arena in 2018.

**He's one of these people I am not sure whether he's dead or not. I mean, he could well still be alive.**

We've got so much to google after this, haven't we? If anybody is listening to this podcast, luckily they can google as we go along.

**Exactly.**

And they can see. And he was American, Carl Douglas, was he? He had the outfit on Top of the Pops, and the producer was one of the backing vocalists, and the producer did very well. That was the guy who did other stuff like the Biddu Orchestra and Tina Charles, but he did backing vocals on that, so it was a production house record.

**Now, I know that you have a glamorous life, you're travelling all around the world, and you're friends with Bruce Springsteen and all that gubbins.**

Hmm...

**What are the stresses of the job? Because if I was in your shoes the thing that might bankrupt the company eight years from now is almost unforeseeable right now. So you've got you've almost got to try and have the Donald Rumsfeld style unknown unknowns; you've got to be a forecaster and see**

**things and have insights that other people haven't yet seen. Is that existentially stressful?**

Yes. And I think that there is never a minute of the day when you're not trying to think of what might happen next. And there is never enough hours in the day to listen to music you have to listen to, and there is always – which is the most exciting thing about doing what I do – is there's always the opportunity that you may listen to something that may change the destiny of the company. You may hear a piece of music or hear an artist or make that extra effort to go somewhere or someone says to me, "You should get on a plane and see this artist, because this is really special." And I may be going, "Well, that's really annoying," because tomorrow night I said I would go to the cinema with my family or I was going to do something relatively normal, and you go, "Argh," and you're on that plane, and you're going to go and see whatever it was that someone recommended. And I spend my life frequently in that dilemma. My children laugh at me because basically I'm conflicted about sometimes two choices, and for instance if I have three shows in New York on a night, I will try and get to three shows if I can. Because I want to make sure I'm not missing out on something that might be relevant. So yes, it's always there. It's unending. It's a bit of a quest, without sounding like to Indiana Jones about it. There is a quest there. You're always hoping to find something that becomes something magical.

**And does it work the other way where an amazing opportunity might present itself and your the guy that turns The Beatles down and says no one's interested in guitar based music any more.**

Sure. Yes, I mean, we've all done it. I mean there's not a person in my position who hasn't made a mistake. It's not even mistakes. I mean, sometimes you don't meet the right person. I mean, I went to Bath Moles twice in a month. Once I saw the Manic Street Preachers, and I did sign them. And then I saw a band called On a Friday and I didn't sign them. And that band turned out to be Radiohead. And obviously I love Radiohead and I've seen Radiohead many times since. I may not have been the right person to work with Radiohead anyway, but the fact is I saw them both in a month and I decided to sign one and I didn't sign the other. It turned out okay, it turned out pretty good, because the Manics are great – but I wish I'd done both.

**Yes, because from a commercial sense that someone else is getting Radiohead's royalties.**

Someone else is getting Radiohead's royalties, that's right. But my judgment, first of all, is based on how much I love the group, and at that stage, especially when I was in my late 20s, it was like it was it was a bit more subjective really than objective. I'm a bit more objective now.

**I might be glamorising it here, but do you have like a network of spotters? I mean, I used to listen to new music with John Peel and Mark Goodier with the evening session on Radio 1, but do you have like really long-haired early 20-year-olds in New York that go to like dingy clubs, and they're the guys who**

**can make the call? You can't go to every gig, so who tells you the gigs to go to?**

We have a huge network. Huge. And now with the internet we have a research network. So we have we have we have kids, all of whom like music, could come out of college and they research the Internet, and they're all massive music fans, and they're tech savvy, and they all research as much information. And my adage to them is I say, "Listen, if you find something that has data that's unusual that's great, but preferably we're not standing at the back of their show in a rainy night in February and they're terrible and they just had that one song." Ideally we're finding something that's special as well. But we have it a tremendous – I mean, obviously, we're big company, a global company – and we have a tremendous network of talent scouts and consultants and A&R staff that's tiered in experience terms, so we have a pretty wide net.

**How do you divide your time, if you don't mind asking? I mean, what's a typical week for you? And you're not allowed to say there's no typical week, because we all know that. But pretend there was. Where would you be? What would you do?**

Well, my typical week would be ideally if I was at least three days in the office. I mean, I tend to go on a on a triangle between London, New York and Los Angeles. And if I'm in New York – probably 60, 65, 70 per cent of the time – then I'm going to be either in Los Angeles or London, occasionally in Europe sometimes, because I work for a Japanese company I'm in Tokyo three times a year. If I can try and get to Australia once a year I will. But mostly New York if I can because that's where my office is based. But obviously my background and my heart is in England and so I am in Britain a lot. And there's always something to be done. But probably, yes, I mean it sounds sort of glamorous to be running around but it's not as glamorous as it appears. No, it's still waking up at strange hours and not knowing where you are and then realising... you have to get off a plane at nine o'clock in the morning and go straight to work and then get back on a plane at nine o'clock that evening. I don't expect anybody feel sorry for me; I'm very grateful and very happy every single day for what I do. But it's not always a bundle of laughs and rock and roll decadence. It's not always like that.

**Do you still get excited to work with artists? Not in the kind of star struck sense. I mean, I worked in Parliament for many years and when you see the foreign secretary queuing up for coffee in front of you, you nearly want to go up and say, "Excuse me, you're the foreign secretary!" But within a couple of weeks it actually becomes pretty normal. And then you end up focussing on the negatives like why is Parliament so cold and why doesn't it have a useful wi-fi and all these kind of things. But when you meet someone like Bruce Springsteen, do you still get excited to meet someone like that?**

Of course. Actually, I took Shakira to Parliament once, and it was actually really good fun because Shakira wanted to see the workings of Parliament. And when they found out she was there – I mean, they were very nice, but then Gordon Brown met her and then when Tony Blair wanted to meet her too, so of course everyone wanted to meet Shakira.

**Were you with Alan Edwards that night? Because he's told me the same anecdote!**

I don't think so. I can't remember who organised for us to get into Parliament but it was great.

**Shakira is on my laminated list. She's beautiful.**

She is, and she's very smart and very politically motivated as well. So she wanted to see the workings of the system, so it was great. But it was funny, because I think she had something to do with the United Nations – actually, Gordon Brown did as well – but then Tony Blair was there quick as well to meet her.

**I bet he was. Because that's the thing – you've got the star power there, haven't you? They're the ones who want to meet who you're with.**

I'm super-reverential about it. Look, I have a good relationship with a lot of the iconic artists on the label but I'm also very cognisant that I'm talking to iconic artists, you know? Hopefully I'm very respectful and very transparent, and I'm aware of that aura. It's like, if you're in a room with David Bowie, he is – he was, God bless him – one of the most fantastic company and friendly and chatty, but you are aware. And he's aware you're aware too. You know, you don't get to be like that without that. But having said that, some of the artists of that scale are tremendous company and they're a joy to be with.

**And some of them aren't.**

I don't see it like that. I mean, I may have seen it like that 25 years ago when I was full of... you know, coming up in the business, but I don't see it like that now. I mean, they're entitled to be how the hell they want to be. It's like, the most important thing is, as I've said before, is to have delivered a catalogue of work that makes people think and that makes people excited and makes people challenged and nostalgic and all those kinds of things, and they don't owe me anything.

**Is it a generational thing? I mean, a friend of mine, Laurence Atkinson, he's a big Hollywood PR guy who's actually done this podcast, and he works with the likes of Dustin Hoffman, Harrison Ford, you know, people like that, Robert Redford, and he says that they're absolute gentlemen, a joy to be around, very respectful, very reverential, great company. But he says when he works on people who are off of TOWIE and things like that, because they've got a small glimpse of glimmer of that, they tend to be impossible have huge riders and blah blah blah.**

Fame is incredibly enticing. You know, music artists get to be famous. It's incredibly alluring, and it can get to be very nasty. And it's hard, you know, you have someone who's suddenly... I mean, I think it's the same with footballers now as well. You suddenly have a lot of money in your bank account and everyone telling you you're great. That is bound to get to you. When we were talking before the podcast about



what it would have been like to have that money when you were in your 20s and all that. I don't know how I would have dealt with it if I was 20 years old and everybody was telling me I was great all day, and that I was immortal.

**It must send you doolally.**

I think it does, and I've worked with a lot of people it does, you know?

**And then to have it all take off you.**

And then to have it all take off you, then you spend the rest of your life telling stories about why it was taken off you.

**I went to see Beverley Craven.**

She was signed to us.

**She performed at Milton Keynes Stables about six months ago, and of course she did Promise Me and all the songs.**

Of course.

**And to be honest she was absolutely amazing. The guy in the car park who was the steward who showed us in, was Geoffrey from Rainbow. Do you remember that TV show? The human guy, Geoffrey?**

Geoffrey was famous!

**He was the guy who showed me where the car parking space was. And that, to me, showed me both sides of fame really. He was presenting the main kids show and suddenly was doing that.**

It would have been even weirder if you'd been to see Rainbow and Beverley Craven was the car park attendant. That would have been really strange, wouldn't it?

**Everyone was coming up to him going, "Are you off Rainbow?"**

If Beverley Craven was a car park attendant that would have been really strange. "I was just driving to see Zippy and Bungle and Geoffrey at Rainbow and Beverley Craven was there!" Listen, I'm sure that... he's on quite a lot of 'where are they now' type features and everything, and I'm guessing he must be in his 70s now, probably late 60s, 70s. But yes, I mean it's tough, and I've seen it. And by the way, several times I've actually said, "This is going to go wrong. Please don't behave like this. This isn't going to end well, and you really have to get yourself together." And some of these artists have come back to me five years later or 10 years later and said, "Yes, it was a pretty rocky rise, that." And I say, "I know, I'm really sorry that it didn't all pan out and everything." And they say, "No, we understand that." I honestly think that's show business. It's obviously not just music, it's film, it's now sport as well, and

it's very difficult. I watched the George Best documentary that was put out recently and that was tragic. Having said that, he had a bright flame that burned very quickly.

**Or as my nieces would say, "Calum Best's dad."**

That's not the same niece who listened to Revolver, is it?! Is that the same one? Calum... that's...

**Unforgivable.**

Unforgivable, yes.

**Penultimate question. And you mentioned that Bowie was great to work with. I'm not expecting you to dish any dirt on anyone that you didn't enjoy working with, but who's been the best people you've worked with so far?**

Look, I love... the Manic Street Preachers, I mean, for whatever reason, we went through a lot together with the disappearance of Ritchie and then really breaking through properly on the fourth record, so that was amazing. And I speak to them a lot, and we're friends with our families and our kids, and that's... I'm 27 years in and I love them as human beings, and the level of loyalty and thoughtfulness that we have to each other is pretty remarkable for this business. I mean, I've worked with Adele now for nine years, I think she's incredibly special. I understand all the challenges... and I like... I mean, honestly, I mean Beyoncé is very special, I mean most of the artists that I work with I honestly, especially the ones have been around a long time, I don't really have a bad word to say about them. I understand what they go through, I have unique insight into the difficulties they encounter, and I have enormous respect. so I don't have a bad word to say about most of our important artists. I mean, going back to your one-hit wonders thing, we've had a few one wonders where you've gone, "Honestly, this is just too much pain to do this." But the fact is that most of them, I've had special times with. I mean, there's artists that I haven't seen frequently, but when I've met them it's been great. And I've been like a fan, and I've been like... I've done incredible things with artists that people who have other jobs that are lucrative – I don't know, working for an investment bank – that I've done things that people would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to do that are part of my job. And I'm really honestly grateful for that every single day, it never leaves me. There are things where I go, "Isn't this mad that I'm doing this?" And I'm actually getting paid for it, which is really weird, but I'm doing this, and this is a moment. And hopefully when I'm sitting with the tartan rug, living in the English countryside when I move back from America eventually, those moments will be everything that I remember. That will be the bit. It won't be a disc on the wall, it will be, "Wasn't that great when we sat and did this?"

**And that pre-empts my final question. What has been the best moment of your career so far and what's been the worst?**

The best moment honestly is when you hear those records. You're in a studio or someone comes in and plays it to you, and you hear that record and you go, "That is great, that is going to be a huge hit, and that is going to change everything." And

those are the best moments, and I remember those moments so vividly, and that's still really the criteria by which I get up in the morning, really. So that's it. And the worst... oh, God, the worst moments.

**This podcast.**

The worst moment has been the last 45 minutes.

**(Laughs)**

No, the worst moments are when you can see things going wrong, and you're trying to help fix it but you can't. And it's not going to work, and you're trying to limit the damage. You know something isn't going to be successful, and even though you're going through the motions to try and make something okay, it doesn't turn out to be okay. And again, that's something that could happen to me next week, you know? And with the size of the roster I work with and the varied artists I work with, it's a constant dilemma as to whether something is going to be incredible and work beautifully or something is going to fail. It's a pretty complicated failure-success strike rate. So I face those challenges most days really.

**Rob, this could be a three hour podcast, it's been that interesting – but we've run out of metaphorical tape so we're going to have to leave it there. Thank you ever so much.**

Pleasure. We'll do one hit wonders another time. You just have to reel off a lot of one-hit wonders and I'll answer you back.

**Well, you'd have to do it as well, we'd have to co-present it. I'm not going to take all the presenting duties!**

Okay, we may have come up with something there. Okay.

**Thanks again.**

Nice to talk to you. Cheers.