

Andy Varley

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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 down the line by Andy Varley, founder of the Insanity Group, the leading international talent management and music firm. Launched at 17 from his parents' home in Kent, Insanity has enjoyed chart-topping albums from Tom Grennan and represents leading broadcasters, including Jo Whiley and Mollie King. Created as an event management and promotions company, working with Zane Lowe, Insanity expanded into a record company, enjoying huge success with Craig David and Tom Grennan. He opened an LA office in 2016 with a business spanning podcasts management and live music, Insanity is an independent entrepreneur-led company, going toe to toe with huge corporate entities. Andy, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me, Paul. That was a really thorough introduction. I don't think I've got anything more to add to that, to be honest.

Wish we just end the podcast there then, and just say you're, you're obviously a very driven, very successful young man.

I think that'd be a good idea.

Well, I mean, you were named young entrepreneur of the year at just 17. That was after you began Insanity to originally was it to sell computer games? Was it not?

That's right? Yeah. Actually, if you go back a little bit further, I actually found Insanity in its original vice in 1992 when I was just 12 years old. So I think I was one of those kids who was surrounded by entrepreneurs. Actually, when I was growing up, my great grandfather had a business that was left in the family to my grandfather and then to my father. I actually didn't really like the idea of running an electrical shop

though. So thought actually, aged 12, the world of computer games and selling computer games was a little bit more exciting. So I think, starting that as I did, when I was in my first year at secondary school, I did it as a way of number one, making some money. I come from a very working-class background.

My dad repaired washing machines and my mom was a dinner lady. And then I guess it was also just a way of, I guess, building up my own collection of computer games, which has most normal 12-year-old kids. That's quite an exciting thing. But I guess as I started to get a bit older and started to move into my sort of teenage adolescent years, I became less interested in computer games and more interested in the world of music. So yeah, 1997, age 17, was when it was started and it was actually throwing, organising events. Should I say? And in particular in sort of November, 1997, I organised a battle of the bands competition, which introduced me to a whole bunch of different artists and that's where Insanity and its current advice all kicked off.

It's incredible. So you've never had a job then, you've always run a business. Is that something that's in your blood then? How are entrepreneurs born or are they made, is it something in your DNA, something in your upbringing? Did someone say something to you in a sort of, in the early years that ignited some kind of entrepreneurial spark?

I think it's always been in my blood if I'm honest, I guess, growing up around a father and a grandfather that sort of ran their own business. And also, as I said before, coming from quite a working-class background, I realised that if I wanted money, I needed to earn the money. I wasn't fed with the silver spoon as they say, I had to work for everything I had. So I guess in my professional life, this is the only job I've ever had. However, if we go sort of back to the very, very start when I was growing Insanity as a teenager, initially I had two part-time jobs, which essentially funded this sort of passion project on the side. I worked in a shoe shop, and I also worked at a football club, Gillingham, in Kent, which was my home team. And so I guess I learned from both of those jobs kind of how to work in a team. And I kind of picked up some good and bad experiences from working with a couple of bosses at those two companies. And I guess really from 17 onwards, I've been self-employed. And I've had to just learn how to run a company and how to grow a business through sort of trial and error really.

Well. I mean, walk our listeners through some of the highs and some of the lows — there must have been some incredible moments of elation and success, and also some very trying challenging times behind the scenes as you, as you built the business.

Yeah, for sure. I remember I have this really sort of clear memory actually, it must have been sort of 2003. I had gone to university in 2000 to study Business Administration degree at the University of Kent in Canterbury. I graduated from uni, I'd been running Insanity, all the way through those three years at university had an office about a five-minute drive from my university campus, employed a couple of friends at uni to answer phones and reply to emails whilst I was studying. And I had this moment where I graduate from university. I went back home to live with my parents and I'd been running Insanity from my original kind of teenage bedroom for about six months after graduating and then decided that I needed to get an office. So I took an office, locally stayed living at home, at my parents to save money.

All of every penny that I made from Insanity was reinvested back into the business. And then I had this moment where I decided that I should probably take an office space that was slightly more geared around the world of entertainment. So I moved the business up to London and I remember getting a train back down from London to Kent, where I was living and I'd signed the lease for this really great office space in Trafalgar Square. And I had a call from one of the big agents at one of the big kind of live music touring agencies. And he called me essentially to offer me a job, I sort of kindly and politely said no, and told him that I'd just taken this office space in London and that I was gonna really go for it. And he essentially wore me off.

He said that the world of entertainment was challenging, that I needed to watch my back essentially, that there was much more competition in London. And I think in a way that sort of put so much fire in my belly to really grow the business and to build it to be as big as it possibly could be. And to prove this guy, Ron, it was actually quite funny because a few years later that same guy that had offered me a job ended up being somebody that was essentially working for me as part of Craig, David's extended team. So that was quite a nice kind of full circle, moment actually. But yeah, there's been lots of highs and lows along the line. And I think from my perspective, the journey of growing a company certainly in the early years can actually be quite lonely.

Quite often you are building a business on your own or with a very small number of people. I think if you are somebody like myself who essentially learns a lot of what it takes to run a business on the job, you don't have a huge number of people to really turn to ask for advice. Whilst my father had created his own business, he hadn't created that business from scratch. He inherited a business from his grandfather and his father and I guess he made it his own over a number of years, but there wasn't really anybody for me, certainly in my personal or family circles that I could really turn to ask for advice, obviously over the last 25 years, a lot's changed, I'm really fortunate now to have a great team of advisors and mentors around me. But in those early years it was a case of trial and error. And I definitely made a lot of mistakes.

Yeah. You've learned a huge amount over the years about how to be a better leader and an entrepreneur. One final question on this before we start to dig into the actual journey and all the successes along the ways, how have you changed? What have you learned about yourself along the way?

Do you know what, this might sound like a slightly cliché answer to that question, but I think a lot of my friends would say that, well, certainly a lot of my friends that have known me from very early on in my life would, I'd like to think they'd say that I haven't really changed an awful lot. To be honest, I was brought up by a really loving family and family has played a really, really important part in my journey as an executive as well. Certainly from a support perspective. But I was definitely kind of taught by my father that I should treat people the way I'd wanna be treated myself. And that's something that I remind myself every day. I think that as I have grown, certainly from a professional perspective, I've had to understand the importance, for example, of pro-social modeling with my team.

And I guess as I was growing the business and growing my career in the entertainment industry over the years, there was certainly a point relatively early on where I started to employ quite a few people. And we were all friends. We were in this great office in the middle of Soho. We were growing this business together. We would socialise in the weekends, we'd socialise kind of every night, I guess, in the entertainment industry. There's lots of sort of fun events and parties and functions and gigs that you can go to. And we were all just kind of hanging out together. And I guess as the company has grown, certainly in the last sort of 5 to 10 years, and we're now operating at significant scale with sort of 80 staff globally, 66 in London, 14 in our office in Los Angeles. I think I've had to kind of continually remind myself of

the importance of leading from the top. And I guess I've had to maybe change my leadership style to be arguably slightly more professional and slightly more corporate in recent years in order to ensure that we can be competing with all of these other great companies that are in our line of work.

A lot of entrepreneurs realise that, you know, they have to quote-unquote professionalise, as they get bigger.

No, that's totally it. I think from my perspective, we have had to put a whole bunch of systems and processes in place really to deal with the shared level of volume that comes with working at the scale that we work at. I guess now sort of in 2022, we have 350 clients that we represent. We have, as I mentioned before, 80 staff. And I guess with that comes a requirement to have a pretty robust backend system to ensure that the company runs smoothly. And I think from my perspective, I've learned along the way, but I've never been somebody that's been afraid to ask questions, whether that's to my accountant or to the various different lawyers that we use for different areas of the business. But also, like I said, at the start, there's a certain element of trial and error when you are managing talent.

It's very different to say, working in a supermarket, where you are selling a product or a commodity, you are working with individuals and you're working with individuals that really just have one shot at this career, within the media industries, whether that's in broadcast or social media or music, people really do have one shot. And so we take our responsibility as managers incredibly seriously. So I think if we weren't taking our jobs as seriously as we do, we could probably get away with being slightly more cavalier in our approach. But I think this sort of professional structure that now exists in the company is really something that is safeguarding us for the future. And I think one of the questions that I'm often asked is with regards to our scale and how we're dealing with that.

And I think from my perspective, the one thing that keeps me up at night is the fact that I really want our culture as a company to scale at the same time as the business itself physically scales. And so I'm constantly reassessing our approach and our outlook on our business, whether that's how we manage our team or how we manage the talent that we represent. And that's a constantly evolving process. So I think it's very, very hard to start out in this industry and to maintain sort of equilibrium

when it comes to your management style, because the industry and the talent that you represent are so forever evolving.

Right. Well, let's take a step back if we can, for our listeners, because I think they'd be interested in what Insanity group is today, but also what you do, like what a typical week looks like. So there's a question in two parts. One, can you give us a kind of 101 overview of what Insanity Group does? Also, what do you do?

Absolutely. So as a company, Insanity takes a 360-degree approach to talent representation. We kind of started, as you mentioned, with me running essentially a kind of events business, the company evolved from events into working as an agent for a bunch of talent. You mentioned Zane Lowe in the introduction. Zane was one of the clients that sort of played quite a sort of critical role in the evolution of the business. And by that I mean that around that time, so we're probably talking sort of 2004, 2005, I was representing personally a lot of clients in the music space, particular DJs. And we found this kind of niche in the world of DJ representation, where we started to represent the live touring proposition for talent that were essentially radio broadcasters.

Zane Lowe was somebody that I always admired. I always listened to his show and I was also a big fan of his MTV TV show. But also I saw that there was an opportunity with Zane to really evolve his offering from a perspective. And so we came up with this brand called 'Home Taping', which we really successfully taught around predominantly universities and nightclubs and festivals for a number of years. And I think it was through Zane that I started to meet a lot of other sort of credible DJs that liked the job that I was doing for Zane and wanted the same for themselves. And so we grew very organically across the various different disciplines of DJ management from radio DJs to club DJs, to bands that happened to DJ in their spare time bands like Arctic Monkeys and block party that were very successful back in those days.

And I think from my perspective, I never saw Insanity as being a business that was just in one particular vertical, I guess a by-product of representing radio broadcasters for their touring endeavours led to certain DJs approaching us and asking us for representation for the rest of their career, negotiating their radio contracts, negotiating TV contracts, negotiating brand deals. And so we almost by accident became this full service management company. And I guess then in 2007, we

decided to formally set Insanity talent management up as a business within the Insanity Group of companies. And we started to represent not just DJs and broadcasters, but also TV presenters. And the roster just grew very naturally and very organically, in 2014 we decided to rebrand the booking agency side of the business under a different name, low co-talent, so that there was a real clear differentiation between the touring business and the management company.

And then I guess we started to enjoy a lot of successes as a business around that time. And I think the diversification has really done us a favour over the years to ensure that we've always stayed one step ahead of the game and have constantly grown as a business. And then we had this real sort of turning point. I actually got married in 2014 to my wife Leila.

Congratulations.

Thank you. We went on a really lovely honeymoon in Mexico in January 2015. And for the very first time in my career, I actually took, I was planning to take four weeks off from work to really just focus on, I guess, enjoying my honeymoon and taking a well-needed rest from the day-to-day life of running a busy company. But I had this kind of epiphany moment in the sort of three, four years running up to that point.

We enjoyed tremendous success on the music side of the roster. We'd had artists like DJ Fresh and Sigma that had enjoyed back-to-back number one singles and sold a significant number of records globally. We started to build out the rest of the music management company and we'd taken on various other artists, DJs, producers, writers, etc. And I remember being maybe a week or two into my honeymoon, and there was an artist that I thought we were doing a really great job on. We'd enjoyed a couple of top 10 singles and a couple of top 40 singles. And she told me that she was going to let me know that she no longer required my services as a manager. And I remember saying to my wife, this is the only downside of talent management in the traditional sense. I recall a conversation I had really early on in my career where a slightly, what I thought was a slightly cynical, music manager said to me, 'Andy, you're guaranteed two things as an artist manager - you're gonna get hired and you're gonna get fired.'

And I thought to myself, actually, you know what, we do a really great job as a company, but it's really, really important for us if we're going to be dedicating time

care, attention, resources, contacts, relationships into building the careers of artists, particularly in the music space that we wanna have some level of ownership of the IP that we're helping to create. And so it was at that point, having returned from my honeymoon, the end of January, early February 2015, that I started to think about what a rights business might look like. And I took a meeting with Jason Iley, who had just taken on the role of Chairman and CEO of Sony Music in the UK. He liked my ideas and he kind of said to me, 'why are you calling this a rights business? Why don't you start a record company?'

And so I kind of pitched this idea of a record company that for the most part was going to be focused on, signing dance acts like one-off dance records. We'd had all that success with those artists that I mentioned before that were in the world of drum bass and dubstep and house music. And so I pitched this idea of setting up a record label. We called it Insanity Records. Jason and I did the deal in summer 2015, and Insanity Records was founded and it was a real turning point. Number one, I had a boss for the first time, and I've learned a huge amount from being part of the Sony Music machine over the last, well, it'll be seven years in August this year, which just feels absolutely crazy. But then we've obviously enjoyed some pretty sort of significant success during that time with Craig and Tom Grennan and Joy Crookes more recently.

But at the same time as running that side of the business, I really wanted to continue to focus on the diversification of the overall company. And so in 2017, we launched our digital division representing content creators and so-called social media influencers. I think that influence of word has almost become a bit of a swear word in recent times, just as the sort of bandwidth within the industry has increased so much. And we've obviously continued to evolve over more recent times with the growth of our Insanity podcast productions division in 2021. And we're gonna be launching another part of our company, Annexe 97, over the next few months. So yeah, it's been a real process of evolution from those early days in my bedroom to now working at such a tremendous scale.

Do you still enjoy it as much as you always did?

I do. I was actually saying to somebody this morning, I was interviewing a candidate for a new role. And I really, really do love it. I feel like I've got more fire in my belly than I ever have. Obviously, like my day-to-day has really changed over the years. I

have a pretty solid structure now kind of Monday to Friday, I try to have a good work-life balance, which is really tricky when you are managing such a large company. I became a father in 2019 for the first time. I now have two kids, Zain who turns three in August and Casper who turned one last Wednesday. And it's really important for me that I am present as a father, but I'm also really present as a leader.

And so that presents some pretty significant challenges. I have a pretty ridiculous diary as my assistant always likes to remind me. She says on most days it looks like a game of Tetris. So I think for me, it's about being smart with my time, it's about ensuring that the time that I have with individual team members, that I'm always really present, but also when I'm at home and I am with my family that I also am present in those situations. Fortunately, I have a really supportive partner who has a background in the entertainment industry as well, so really understands the fact that my job isn't nine to five and that quite often with the amount of work that we're doing globally, that I'm doing confidence calls way into the night, but I always like to be around wherever I possibly can in the mornings to be able to get my kids out of bed, to give them breakfast, to get my youngest off the nursery at 7:45 am.

And I live in Brighton. So quite often I'm commuting into London each day, but actually that 1 hour 15, that it takes for me to get from my home in Brighton to the office in King's Cross. I can be really focused on ensuring that I'm scheduling my day. I'm keeping on top of the enormous workload that I have so that I can then be present in the office and I can be present in the home situation as well. So yeah, it takes a lot of juggling, but I like to think that I'm somebody that is a good manager of their time, but I'm also somebody that's really fortunate now to have this really phenomenal leadership team. We have a great board of directors. There's four of us in total, plus a non-exec director as well, but then we also have a really fantastic senior management team of general managers that run each of the different areas of the business.

So one of the things I had to do back in 2015, when we were at this real sort of turning point in the company, was to look at how best I should be spending my time. And around that point of doing the deal with Sony to create Insanity Records, I was still managing clients on a day-to-day basis. And I realised that if I was going to make a go of this fantastic opportunity, that we had to build a label business for Sony Music, coupled with the fact that at that very same point in time, we were gonna start our Los Angeles office and build out our US business. Plus also scale up the rest of the company that I'd need to take a bit of a step back from day-to-day talent

management. And obviously, when you do that, there are clients that you are representing at the time that kind of only want you to be their manager.

They don't want to be passed to a junior or a lesser experienced manager, regardless of the fact that you give them all of the warranties that you can, that everything is gonna continue to progress in their career. But I understand that the manager-client relationship is a really personal one, but I think that was a real turning point for me. It actually coincided with some personal mental health issues. I think I had been somebody that had always been working at 300 miles an hour. And I think at that point taking a bit of a step back from personally managing clients, plus also realigning my role led to me experiencing some stress and some anxiety and depression for the first time. And that was something that had been so alien to me, but actually, now I really like to normalise those mental health conversations with the team.

And I like to talk about that publicly because I feel like the entertainment industry is so cyclical, in one given day, you can have highs and lows. You can, from a music perspective, you could start with, I don't know, having a record playlist on radio for the first time, but then at the end of the day, you might not get the festival slot that you were hoping for. And so I think what comes with a cyclical working environment is stress, pressure and anxiety, which can affect your well-being as an individual. So as a company, Insanity really invests into mental health and well-being support for its team. And I'm really proud that we've done that. And obviously during the global pandemic, we've all faced probably more stress and anxiety than we ever have before. But I think from my perspective, that sort of 2015 moment of self-reflection on a personal level has actually been quite instrumental in changing my goals and vision for the global company and actually we've been probably more successful than we ever have in the last seven years.

Yeah, because you employ human beings and you are also a human being. I think the whole way of looking at the workplace in you know, historically in the 50s and 60s was people used to think of themselves as like autonomous production units, like a unit of production, but we're not in factories anymore. Are we were not stood at a LA you know, it's not about hours worked anymore. Is it when you hire someone it's about what can they bring to the business? You know, their enthusiasm, their creativity, their ideas, their connections. It's not about, they must work between 9 and 5:30 with an hour for lunch. I think that that's all dead now, isn't it?

It really is. And I think even more so in the entertainment industry, you know, we, like I was saying before, we take our responsibilities as managers really seriously. And I think as a manager, you are not just negotiating deals. You are negotiating deals, absolutely, but you are also essentially counselled to those individuals. You are an extension of their family. They talk to you about everything from relationships, kids, home life, mental health, you are often having to counsel and coach these individuals through quite stressful situations in both their personal and professional lives. And actually, that takes a very particular type of person. I think from my perspective, as we go toe to toe with the behemoths of the global talent agency world, we don't want to become this kind of corporate machine that essentially just operates in a transactional way. We want to continue to be that family that exists around the talent we represent.

And like you say, it's not 9 to 5. It really is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Back in the days when I was managing DJs and producers, it wouldn't be uncommon for my phone to be ringing at 3:00 AM. When a client has maybe missed a flight, which is gonna then lead to the missing a really important promotional or live touring opportunity the following day. And you have to be awake. You have to be in a position where you can problem solve, even when your eyes have literally opened two seconds previously. And that really takes a toll on your mental health. So I think from our perspective, we always talk about this with our team. We carry out reviews with all of our staff members on a quarterly basis, which again is quite labour intensive, but it enables us to identify problems in the short term, rather than for them to turn into much, much bigger problems long term. And I think that's why we don't tend to have a particularly higher turnover of executives or talent is because we really do talk about these issues on a daily basis.

You're obviously quite a courageous entrepreneur as well, which, you know, props to you, maximum respect. You obviously have the confidence to open an LA office in 2016. You've launched Orbit talent, the live agency in the middle of a global pandemic where live revenues have been totally decimated. You know, you're an independent outfit up against giant Hollywood agencies expanding into Britain. Do you think one day that, you know, one of them will offer to buy you out? I mean, you know, you're taking real risks, aren't you? In a good way.

Absolutely. I think we've always had this vision as a leadership team at Insanity that the sky is the limit and that we want to grow a full-service global entertainment company. So obviously along the line, there's been numerous opportunities for us to essentially sell to a bigger organization, whether that's in the world of private equity or maybe sort of competitive businesses that have maybe seen that we are growing our market share. And I think from my perspective, certainly over the next kind of five years, I definitely have some pretty enormous plans to scale up the business. I feel really proud of the fact that we are one of, if not the only, fully independent management company in the UK that is operating at the scale that we're operating at, we haven't ever taken any outside investment from a private equity company.

We've never been in a place where we've had significant debts to external businesses. In fact, right now we have a positive balance sheet and no debt whatsoever. And that's something I'm enormously proud of. And so obviously that puts us into a place where we are, in my opinion, a really attractive proposition to an outside investor who may be looking to infiltrate the talent management business in the UK, or maybe looking to further grow their rights business in the world of music. But I think for us, it's always about individuals and it's always about collaboration. I think the culture of collaboration that exists in Insanity is pretty much unrivalled. And so whilst I encourage that collaboration amongst the team and also amongst our talent, that extends further to potential external partners. And I think if, at some point in the future, we were to look to partner with a larger company, whether that was a global US-based talent agency or whether it was a rival business in the UK.

I think from my perspective, it would need to be with individuals that understand what culture exists at Insanity. And also that there's a marriage of the culture between the two businesses. I think from my point of view, there's a real opportunity right now, and we're seeing a lot of consolidation in the industry globally. But there's a real opportunity now to take the offering the talent managers and talent agencies provide to the next level as a business. One of the things that I'm really proud of, not just in the record label business with Sony Music, but externally within the other verticals of the businesses that we really place a major emphasis on IP. In the US, for example, whilst on the most part, we're representing content creators, in recent months and years, we've really started to focus on IP and rights. So we've recently acquired life rights of a individual, and we're now turning those life rights into a television series we've signed other scripted IP, which we would look to partner with other production companies and broadcasters on to exploit over the next 12 months.

And I think in the UK, we've started to double down on our talent management offering across broadcast and digital. So rather than keeping the business in a sort of transactional lane where you are negotiating deals with broadcasters and production companies, we've started to invest in clients brand businesses. One of our clients Maya Jama is a very successful television and radio broadcaster. She had a desire around two years ago now to start to grow a cosmetics business. We invested in that business we're equity partners in that business and we're growing that very successfully alongside her. So during the pandemic, we started to identify a bunch of our clients on the digital roster that had a desire to create subscription business models. We had one particular client of ours Bradley Simmons, a successful personal trainer who was offered a pretty lucrative opportunity to create daily content, daily live content should I say, for an online fitness platform, but quite bravely, he decided to turn down that significant offer to work with us and his team at Insanity to create his own subscription model business, which arguably required a lot of sort of patience on his part and a lot of strategy on his part, but also required the services of the wider Insanity business to really kind of grow out that branded business for Bradley. And it's been enormously successful. And that's just a couple of examples of situations where Insanity as a management company have identified really exceptional individuals on our roster that we can build brand businesses for. And that's something that we want to continue to do in the years to come.

What keeps you up at night now?

I think it comes back to what I was saying before. I really worry, and I'm a natural worrier and that's something that I'm constantly working on, but I worry about the growth of the business, scaling the business up, but still maintaining this family culture. And so it's something that on a pretty much a daily basis, I discuss with my team and we figure out ways in which we can really focus on that as the company grows. And I think now, yeah, having 80 staff globally, and I think there's every likelihood that by the end of the year will probably be a head count of a hundred globally. I think that's something that I worry about and something that I really wanna focus on, but there's lots of ways to kind of maintain your culture.

I think, again, adapting that sort of pro-social modelling, checking in on yourself at the same time is checking in on your team, reminding yourself that actually the business started from my bedroom. And it's something that has obviously grown into this kind of global entertainment powerhouse, but that doesn't necessarily mean to

say that you have to get sort of overtly corporate. I actually have a piece of art from an artist called Anthony Barrow, literally by my front door. And it simply says “work hard and be nice to people”. And that's something that I really remind myself on a daily basis, I guess, on this sort of journey of creating the company I'm in this place whereby the rug might be pulled from underneath my feet at any given moment in time. And my mum always said to me, actually, that you need to remember that the people that help you on the way up are also the people that you might need on the way back down again. I just never take anything for granted.

Well, you can't afford to do. Do you have any advice to anyone starting out inspired by your entrepreneurial journey that's sort of taking the first steps along the way?

Yeah, absolutely. I think obviously I created Insanity at a time where life was very different. We didn't have social media. The bandwidth was arguably much smaller than it is right now. And so actually it's harder for people to make as much noise these days as, maybe as, as it was back then in the late 90s when I started out. But I think ultimately everything has to come from a place of wanting to create something that is gonna be a legacy for the future. I think there's a lot of opportunities right now for entrepreneurs to start businesses. And there were statistics that played out during the pandemic where I think more people than ever had registered limited companies in the UK than ever before. And I think that was probably because people had more time to think about what their future looked like and whether they were happy working with the employer that they've been working with at that period of time.

And I think now more companies than ever are shooting up. But I think from my perspective, it's important to approach your business in an ethical way. And I think from that, I mean that you approach the leadership of your teams as you'd like to be led yourself and you grow your business in a way that feels right for the sector that you are working in. I think the challenges that exist now are ensuring that you are always on from a social media perspective and that there are arguably more sort of competitors out there than there ever have been. And, and so actually it's slightly more challenging to make as much noise. But I think if the business is, if the model and the idea that you have for your business is exciting, it will find its way.

Do you enjoy the glamour side of the music industry, the earliest parties, you know, hobnobbing with celebrities and so on?

I think as you get older and you get more experience than the industry, I think those things become slightly less exciting. You're generally focused on how you can ensure that that opportunity for that event could be best utilised by maybe the talent that you are there with. That being said, I do still get those kind of like "pinch me moments" when you are sat at a table at the Brit awards or you're attending the Grammy awards, or when you have a client that's nominated for a national television award. So I do really enjoy those moments, but I always look at those as opportunities for the team to really be able to shine. I think from my point of view, I am someone who really champions my team and really champions the work that they're doing on a daily basis, rather than sort of taking all of the glory of those moments for myself.

And so actually it's quite fulfilling for me as a business leader now to see younger members of staff out and about really enjoying those events and really enjoying those moments with their clients. That being said with my record label executive hat on, I'm still attending a lot of gigs to look for potential new talent. I think one of the things that I'm really proud of with Insanity is that we've always taken this sort of positive, proactive approach to sort of talent representation. We don't rest on our laurels. We haven't got to that place where we've got a bunch of successful clients and thought that's enough. We're always looking for that next exciting client to come through that will be our superstar client of the future. And I think the same could be said for the business itself.

We're always looking for ways in which we can diversify our offering to clients. And so during the pandemic, one of the things that we really started to identify was the fact that when TV productions were halted, when live touring was decimated, we started to double down on our sort of brand partnerships offering. And so over the last sort of 24 months, we've seen an enormous increase in the number of brand deals that we're negotiating as a company, believe it or not, we're closing between 4 to 500 brand partnerships a month at the moment. So we really do know what we're talking about in that brand partnership space. And so one of the things that we've identified is the fact that in the advertising agency areas in particular, I feel that over the last sort of 2 to 3 years, the agency businesses have really evolved.

Some agencies have evolved with the changes in this digital-first approach that so many people were taking some of them haven't. And one of the things that we're looking to really focus on this year is the growth of our brand partnerships business. So actually we're gonna be launching a new area of Insanity called Annexe 97. 'Annexe' because this business is attached to Insanity, but it could equally be attached to another talent management company that doesn't have brand partnerships offering. '97', because it was the year that I started the Insanity business and Annexe 97 is going to be created to be an advertising agency that really does make sense in 2022, it's digitally focused and data-driven, but backed up with 25 years of talent representation experience, which means that we can be creative, but also ensure that brand budgets go much further. And I think that this could be a really revolutionary part of our global business offering.

I mean, tell us about tomorrow, the success that you've enjoyed with the label.

I mean, it's been pretty mind-blowing, to be honest, I'm enormously proud of the team that we have at Insanity Records. As I mentioned before, we started that business in 2015 completely from scratch, actually, there were no artists signed to the label when we joined it. It wasn't like Sony, inherited a label business that already existed elsewhere. We really did start from ground zero. And then over the last kind of six years, we obviously signed Craig David and enjoyed some phenomenal success with him across two albums. We signed Tom Grennan and we continued to enjoy great success with him. Joy Crookes has been a real success story for us as a business.

And in the last kind of 12 months, we've enjoyed further success, we lost frequencies. So yeah, to think that in the last six years, we've had five platinum, three gold and three silver selling singles, three gold-selling albums, and two number ones with three further top fives, plus Brit award nominations and sold-out tours is really quite exciting actually. And so I think sort of moving forward, Tom Grennan and Joy Crookes are both in the studio right now, recording new albums. And we feel really excited about releasing those in the next 12 months. And we'll continue to sign more artists to build out that label offering. So, yeah, I think, again, sky's the limit with Insanity Records and we're really excited to be continuing our global partnership with Sony Music.

How was the nature of talent management, the industry itself, the process changed over the last few years?

It's been quite interesting, actually, I think sort of many content creators now already come with this huge audience and a degree of success. And so, I think from our perspective, we've had to pivot our management offering. I think when you are growing a client that maybe joins you from the very start of their career, they just come with you with a talent, whether that's as a singer, or a producer, or a TV presenter, or maybe they have a great voice and they could potentially be a radio broadcaster. When you're starting at the very, very beginning of the career, the development process can arguably be quite a bit longer. But I think on the digital side, what we've started to find is that clients can sometimes come to us with several million followers and several million people therefore within a preexisting audience.

And so we've had to really change our approach to sort of talent management. And I think from our perspective, it's about identifying the fact that for a lot of these content creators, they can apply almost like a DIY ethic and it's how can we add value as a business? And so I think essentially the way we look to do that is to try not to be a stereotypical agent that essentially waits for the phone to ring and essentially focus on putting together really great strategies, looking at ways for talent to diversify their own businesses into other verticals. So whether that's a social media content creator who may also wanna have a podcast, and it was for that reason that last year we actually launched a podcast production business. And that came off the back of the success that we were enjoying as a management company representing podcasters, in particular, the global phenomenon that is 'My Dad Wrote a Porno' and helping individuals within the podcast space to be able to, again, diversify their businesses. With 'My Dad Wrote a Porno', we negotiated sold-out global tours, we negotiated an HBO TV special, they had bestselling books merchandise. That really is a pretty enormous global business. And so we try to apply that same strategy and that same philosophy to everybody that we take on.

Well, speaking as a massive fan of 'My Dad Wrote a Porno', I think the way that you've expanded that brand is just, as a fan, has been absolutely fantastic. I loved the TV specials. We saw them at the Palladium a couple of months ago. That was amazing. And just to see, you know, see their genuine friendship and how they do it, you've sort of commercialised it and help them fulfil their potential without sort of cheapening it or, you know, they're losing their soul,

obviously, the way you've executed that and helped them fulfil their potential has been incredible.

Absolutely. And I think that's the approach we'd wanna take to everybody that we represent. I think quite often we'll be approached by talent that are in a very particular place in their career where maybe they're looking to make some changes with their representation. And quite often we will say no to talent where we feel like we can't add value. I think because we are operating at such scale now, and because we have 80 executives working within the company that come from so many different backgrounds of the global entertainment industry, we can really apply a best-in-class strategy to the talent that we decide to take on. It really is a partnership when you are managing clients. So if we don't feel like we can add value, or we feel that in any way, shape or form the goals that our talent have are not aligned with the goals that we have as managers, we will say no, but I think, 'My Dad Wrote a Porno' is a really great example of a business that sort of started in one place that's become really diversified. And there's many, many other examples of that, that I'm very proud of on the Insanity roster.

Andy, that was a hugely interesting conversation, massively inspired by success, wishing you the very best for the future. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you, Paul. I really enjoyed the conversation

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