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MICK AND KEITH'S DYNAMIC IS STILL VITAL — AND THE ROLLING STONES ARE ON A HOT STREAK

Time Is On Their Side

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KEITH AND MICK'S DYNAMIC IS STILL VITAL — AND THE ROLLING STONES ARE ON A HOT STREAK

Time Is On Their Side

MUSIC AWARDS JAPAN
2026

CONNECTING WITH THE WORLD AND ILLUMINATING THE FUTURE OF MUSIC.

WINNERS OF SIX MAJOR CATEGORIES

Song of the Year
Kaiju / sakanaction

Artist of the Year
Mrs. GREEN APPLE

Album of the Year
Prema / Fujii Kaze

New Artist of the Year
HANA

Best Global Hit from Japan
HYPNOTIZE / XG

Best Song Asia
Golden / HUNTR/X
From South Korea

2026.6.13 SAT TOYOTA ARENA TOKYO & SGC HALL ARIAKE

SEE ALL THE WINNERS ON MUSICAWARDSJAPAN.COM

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JULY 18, 2026
VOLUME 138
NO. 7

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Mick Jagger photographed by Joe Pugliese on June 30 in London.

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Keith Richards photographed by Kevin Mazur on July 2 at The Django in New York.

There is no one like him. A towering figure. Kind and funny. As generous as he was talented, with a mystical ability to spot opportunities that no one else could see coming.

"Few executives left fingerprints on as many defining moments in Black music history as McClain and fewer still did it as quietly,"

– Sophie Lloyd, Rolling Out

John McClain

We are heartbroken at the loss of this great man, our friend and brother.

John Branca, Karen Langford, Diana Baron, Michael Kane, Jonathan Steinsapir, Jeryll Cohen, Martin Singer, Thom Mesereau and everyone at the Estate of Michael Jackson

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Rolling Stone

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TIME100

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"... THE REALM OF THE UNABASHEDLY LITERARY SONGWRITER ELITE"
npr music

"TOP 100 GREATEST LIVING AMERICAN SONGWRITERS"
The New York Times Magazine

★★★★★

★★★★★

"ON KAHAN'S FOURTH ALBUM, HE SHOWCASES JUST HOW SHARP HIS SONGWRITING, VOCALS, AND MUSICIANSHIP HAVE BECOME."
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AWARDS WINS

KATSEYE
New Artist of the Year
Best Music Video
Breakthrough Pop Artist

SHAKIRA
Best Female Latin Artist
Tour of the Year

ZAC BROWN BAND
Featuring our client, Zac Brown
Best Country Duo or Group

BLACK EYED PEAS
Featuring our client, will.i.am
Best Throwback Song

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charts

DATA FOR WEEK OF 7.18.2026

RAFAEL PAVARETTI

A ROYAL RETURN

Madonna's 10th No. 1 Album

BILLBOARD 200

1

Confessions II
Madonna

LAST WEEK	PEAK POSITION	WEEKS ON CHART
–	1	1

MADONNA becomes the first act with a No. 1 on the Billboard 200 in the 2020s and three other decades (1980s, 2000s and 2010s) as her new studio album, *Confessions II*, launches atop the list. The sequel to 2005's fellow No. 1, *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, earns the Queen of Pop her 10th leader. She becomes just the third woman to break double digits, joining Taylor Swift, with 15, and Barbra Streisand, with 11.

Confessions II opens with 134,000 equivalent album units — driven most heavily by 114,000 in album sales — in the United States in the week ending July 9, according to Luminate. That marks the largest week for a dance album this year, as well as Madonna's best week by units since the Billboard 200 transitioned from measuring sales to units in December 2014. The set also gives Madonna her biggest streaming week for an album (20.1 million on-demand official plays of its songs), her largest sales week in more than a decade and her biggest vinyl sales week (59,000) since Luminate began tracking data in 1991.

The set was widely released in both 12- and 16-track versions. Its sales were bolstered by its availability across 15 vinyl variants, six digital versions, four CD editions and a cassette. It's Madonna's first studio project since the 2019 No. 1 *Madame X* and her first back on Warner Records after three albums with Interscope. *Confessions II* was announced in April and arrived July 3, supported by a marketing campaign for which she teamed with brands such as Absolut, Bilt, Dolce & Gabbana, Grindr, KIKO Milano, MISTR and TikTok.

—KEITH CAULFIELD

Hot 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title / PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist / IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
(1)	(1)	1	#1 for 13 WEEKS **Choosin' Texas** E.LANGLEY,B.WEST,M.LAMBERT (E.LANGLEY,C.L.DICK,M.LAMBERT,J.TAYLOR)	Ella Langley SAWGOD/COLUMBIA/TRIPLE TIGERS	1	38
2	2	2	**I Knew It, I Knew You** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,J.M.ANTONOFF)	Taylor Swift PIXAR/WALT DISNEY/REPUBLIC/MCA NASHVILLE	1	5
3	3	3	**Be Her** E.LANGLEY,B.WEST,M.LAMBERT (E.LANGLEY,S.AHNQUIST,J.M.SCHMIDT,M.W.HARDY)	Ella Langley SAWGOD/COLUMBIA/TRIPLE TIGERS	2	21
(9)	(6)	4	**I Can't Love You Anymore** B.WEST,A.GOODLOE,E.LANGLEY (E.LANGLEY,A.GOODLOE,J.TAYLOR)	Ella Langley & Morgan Wallen SAWGOD/COLUMBIA/TRIPLE TIGERS	4	11
(19)	(8)	5	**Dracula** K.R.PARKER (K.R.PARKER,S.AARONS,JENNIE,C.GIBERT)	Tame Impala & JENNIE COLUMBIA	5	41
7	7	6	**Hate That I Made You Love Me** A.GRANDE,ILYA,MAX MARTIN (A.GRANDE,J.SALMANZADEH,MAX MARTIN)	Ariana Grande REPUBLIC	1	6
12	10	7	**I Just Might** BRUNO MARS,D'MILE (BRUNO MARS,D.EMILE II,P.M.LAWRENCE II,B.BROWN)	Bruno Mars ATLANTIC	1	26
6	(4)	8	**Janice STFU** NOT LISTED (A.GRAHAM)	Drake OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	1	8
11	12	9	**So Easy (To Fall In Love)** J.H.RYAN,J.BUNETTA,Z.NAHOME (O.L.DEAN,J.H.RYAN,A.R.ALLEN,M.WOLFGANG)	Olivia Dean POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	5	41
8	5	10	**Man I Need** Z.NAHOME (O.L.DEAN,T.JESSO JR.,Z.NAHOME)	Olivia Dean POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	2	46
RE-ENTRY		(11)	**Courtesy Of The Red, White And Blue (The Angry American)** J.STROUD,T.KEITH (T.KEITH)	Toby Keith DREAMWORKS NASHVILLE/UME	11	22
(14)	(13)	(12)	**Boston** J.REEVES (G.ENGER,J.K.HINDLIN,J.REEVES,N.KAHAN,S.LEFTY)	Stella Lefty SANDLOT/ATLANTIC OUTPOST/ATLANTIC	12	14
5	9	(13)	**Drop Dead** D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO,D.L.NIGRO,A.R.ALLEN)	Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	1	12
4	11	14	**Stupid Song** D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO,D.L.NIGRO)	Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	3	4
(15)	(14)	(15)	**Risk It All** BRUNO MARS,D'MILE (BRUNO MARS,D.EMILE II,J.E.FAUNTLEROY II,P.M.LAWRENCE II)	Bruno Mars ATLANTIC	4	19
(19)	17	(16)	**Midnight Sun** MARGO XS,MNEK,H.GAO (Z.M.LAWSON,H.GAO,U.OSISIOMA EMENIKE,M.WILDMAN)	Zara Larsson SOMMER HOUSE/EPIC	16	25
(25)	19	(17)	**Spend Dat** J WHITE DID IT (C.R.BROWNLEE,A.C.KING,M.SIMMONDS,J WHITE DID IT)	Yung Miami YUNG MIAMI/UPTOWN/REPUBLIC	17	7
17	16	18	**Stateside** PINKPANTHERESS,THE DARE,AKSEL ARVID,O.SCHELLER,COUNT BALDOR,JKARRI,PHIL (PINKPANTHERESS,H.P.SMITH,C.AILIN,U.OSISIOMA EMENIKE,Z.M.LAWSON)	PinkPantheress With Zara Larsson PINKPANTHERESS/300/ATLANTIC	6	27
(22)	21	(19)	SAL **Don't We** J.MOI,CHARLIE HANDSOME (M.C.WALLEN,R.H.BLOCK,J.BYRON,A.G.GORLEY, B.PENDERGRASS,CHARLIE HANDSOME)	Morgan Wallen MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	19	22
(21)	20	(20)	**Be By You** CHIP MATTHEWS,J.D.SINGLETON,L.COMBS (D.ALLEY,S.BANKS,N.WALSH)	Luke Combs SEVEN RIDGES/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	12	21

Go to the Chart Beat section of billboard.com for complete charts coverage.

MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES

HOT 100

11

"Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)"
Toby Keith

Following a festive Fourth of July holiday and continued buzz surrounding the FIFA World Cup 2026, nine classics reenter the Billboard Hot 100.

Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" leads the haul at No. 11, driven most heavily by 15.3 million official U.S. streams July 3-9 — a 198% surge week over week — according to Luminate. It's also up 492% to 2.6 million in airplay audience and 215% to 6,000 downloads sold.

The song earns Keith, who died in 2024, his highest Hot 100 rank, surpassing "Red Solo Cup" (No. 15, 2012). His patriotic track originally reached No. 25 in 2002, when it became the ninth of his 20 Hot Country Songs No. 1s. It also hits new No. 2 bests on both Streaming Songs and Digital Song Sales.

Among other celebratory tracks that reenter are two in the top 40 by acts that end decadeslong absences from the Hot 100. Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" returns at No. 31 (9.3 million streams, up 75%), marking the band's first appearance since 1978. The song hit No. 8 in 1974. Plus, Journey is back for the first time since 1997 with "Don't Stop Believin'." The No. 9 hit from 1981 recharts at No. 35 thanks to holiday streams (8.2 million, up 27%) and after it was played June 19 at Lumen Field in Seattle during the United States-Australia match (which the U.S. team won), with the crowd of 67,000 singing along.

Fans that day also crooned to John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads," a reentry at No. 41 (7 million, up 62%). Denver, who died in 1997, last appeared on the Hot 100 in 1984. The song (with Fat City) became his breakthrough hit, rising to No. 2 in 1971.

The other reentries related to the recent revelry and reflection: Miley Cyrus' "Party in the U.S.A." (No. 25), Zac Brown Band's "Chicken Fried" (No. 32), Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." (No. 36), Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" (No. 44) and Kenny Chesney's "American Kids" (No. 46).

—GARY TRUST

HOT 100 FIRST-TIMERS

Artists who have recently made their initial appearances on the chart

ARTIST	SONG	DEBUT POSITION	DEBUT DATE
Alyssa Grace	"Bloodstream"	92	June 20
Role Model	"High Hopes 3000"	94	June 20
Cameron Whitcomb	"Kingdom of Fear"	95	June 20
Robert Smith	"What's Wrong With Me" with Olivia Rodrigo	17	June 27
Kameron Marlowe	"No Need for Livin' "	99	July 11
pupsies	"misery."	80	July 18

BASED BY SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD HOT 100, THE BEST SONGS IN AMERICA, RANKS ALL GENRES. RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY (AUDIO & IN-VIDEO SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE; RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE AND MEDIABASE) AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2026 BILLBOARD MEDIA, LLC (AND LUMINATE INC.). ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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BILLBOARD 200

7

Ken Carson
xperiment

The rapper snags his second top 10 as *xperiment* enters with 42,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending July 9, according to Luminate.

13

Rylo Rodriguez
S.K.A.T.E.

His third entry on the chart debuts with 37,000 units and arrives in the top 10 on Top Rap Albums (No. 3), Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums (No. 5) and Top Streaming Albums (No. 9).

38

Lynyrd Skynyrd
All Time Greatest Hits

July 4-inspired streaming was good to this hits package. The set jumps 39% in units earned and gives the band its 13th top 40-charted album — its first since 2012.

9
Sienna Spiro
Visitor

Spiro scores her first entry on the Billboard 200 with her debut full-length studio album, *Visitor*, launching at No. 9. The set enters with 39,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending July 9. Of that sum, album sales comprise 17,000 (*Visitor* debuts at No. 4 on Top Album Sales), bolstered by its availability across 10 vinyl variants (including two signed editions), six CD variants (including four signed versions), two download options and one cassette.

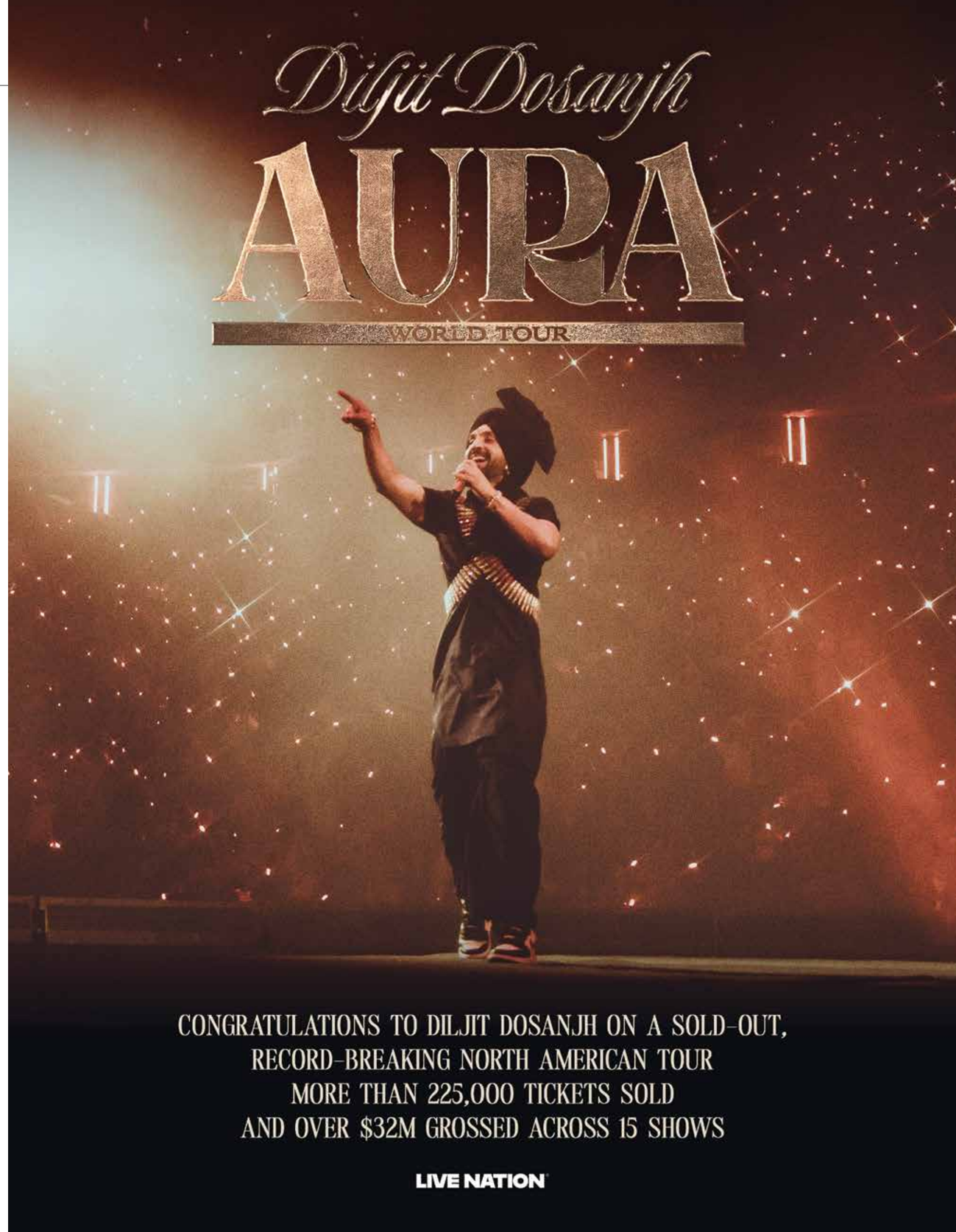
Visitor's debut follows a trio of Billboard Hot 100-charting hits from the English singer-songwriter's album: "The Visitor" (No. 43 peak in March), "You Stole the Show" (No. 55, February) and "Die on This Hill" (No. 19, February). The lattermost track is Spiro's current promoted radio single, which has become a top 10 hit on the Mainstream Top 40 and Adult Top 40 charts. –KEITH CAULFIELD

Billboard 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist / IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
HOT SHOT DEBUT		1	#1 for 1 WEEK **Madonna** WARNER	**Confessions II**	1	1
1	2	2	**Olivia Rodrigo** GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	**you seem pretty sad for a girl so in love**	1	4
3	3	3	**Ella Langley** SAWGOD/COLUMBIA	**Dandelion**	1	13
4	5	4	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**I'm The Problem**	1	60
2	4	5	**Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	**ICEMAN**	1	8
5	6	6	**Noah Kahan** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**The Great Divide**	1	11
NEW		7	**Ken Carson** OPIUM/INTERSCOPE/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	**xperiment**	7	1
6	7	8	**Michael Jackson** EPIC/LEGACY	**Thriller**	1	726
NEW		9	**Sienna Spiro** CAPITOL/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	**Visitor**	9	1
44	31	10	GG **Toby Keith** SHOW DOG-UNIVERSAL/UME	**35 Biggest Hits**	1	255
8	9	11	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**One Thing At A Time**	1	175
7	8	12	**Michael Jackson** MJJ/EPIC/LEGACY	**Number Ones**	6	245
NEW		13	**Rylo Rodriguez** GLASS WINDOW/MOTOWN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	**S.K.A.T.E.**	13	1
12	11	14	**Noah Kahan** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**Stick Season**	2	189
9	10	15	**Olivia Dean** POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	**The Art Of Loving**	3	41
13	12	16	**Don Toliver** DONNWAY & CO/CACTUS JACK/ATLANTIC/AG	**Octane**	1	23
11	14	17	**Bad Bunny** RIMAS	**Debi Tirar Mas Fotos**	1	79
14	15	18	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	**Dangerous: The Double Album**	1	287
-	1	19	**ATEEZ** KQ/RCA/HELLO82	**GOLDEN HOUR : PART.5 (EP)**	1	2
15	17	20	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	**SOS**	1	187

SALES AND AIRPLAY DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ALBUMS, BASED ON MULTI-METRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, DIGITAL SONG SALES AND STREAMING EQUIVALENT ALBUM (SEA) UNITS. SEE BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2026 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



GLOBAL 200

1

"Dai Dai (FIFA World Cup Official Song 2026)"
Shakira X Burna Boy

SHAKIRA AND BURNA BOY'S "Dai Dai (FIFA World Cup Official Song 2026)" kicks up two spots for its first week at No. 1 on the Billboard Global 200. It also holds for a third week atop the Billboard Global Excl. U.S. chart. It's the first official World Cup anthem to lead the lists, which launched in 2020.

"Dai Dai" drew 41.5 million streams (up 8% week over week) and sold 6,000 worldwide July 3-9, according to Luminate. Shakira claims her second Global 200 No. 1 after "TQG" (with Karol G) led in its debut week in March 2023. Burna Boy reigns for the first time.

Shakira and Burna Boy performed "Dai Dai" for a reported 80,000-plus fans at the FIFA World Cup 2026 opening ceremony at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca on June 11. Soccer's preeminent tournament runs through July 19, when Shakira, Justin Bieber, BTS and Madonna are set to take the stage at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., for the first-ever World Cup final halftime show.

Plus, Temper City reaches the Global Excl. U.S. top 10 as "Self Aware" climbs 11-9, up 5% to 21 million streams outside the United States. In March, the song became the first *Billboard* chart entry for the Los Angeles-based trio of Israeli singer-songwriters Aviv Barenholtz, Chen Kordova and Eytan Peled. It holds at its No. 3 best on Alternative Airplay and has hit the Hot Rock & Alternative Songs top 10 following its breakout on TikTok. It has additionally made the top 10 on six rankings among *Billboard*'s Hits of the World charts, reflecting its consumption in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Switzerland.

—GARY TRUST

Global 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
9	3	1	#1 for 1 WEEK **Dai Dai (FIFA World Cup Official Song 2026)**	Shakira X Burna Boy	1	7
2	1	2	**Hate That I Made You Love Me**	Ariana Grande	1	6
6	5	3	**Choosin' Texas**	Ella Langley	3	37
3	4	4	**Billie Jean**	Michael Jackson	1	152
1	2	5	**Stupid Song**	Olivia Rodrigo	1	4
7	6	6	**Dracula**	Tame Impala & JENNIE	2	39
8	7	7	**Swim**	BTS	1	16
10	9	8	**Beauty And A Beat**	Justin Bieber Feat. Nicki Minaj	1	13
17	15	9	**Ordinary**	Alex Warren	1	74
4	8	10	**The Cure**	Olivia Rodrigo	2	7
5	10	11	**Drop Dead**	Olivia Rodrigo	1	12
15	13	12	**Man I Need**	Olivia Dean	2	46
19	18	13	**Earrings**	Malcolm Todd	13	14
11	12	14	**I Knew It, I Knew You**	Taylor Swift	1	5
14	14	15	**Beat It**	Michael Jackson	5	13
13	11	16	**Janice STFU**	Drake	1	8
20	21	17	**The Fate Of Ophelia**	Taylor Swift	1	40
16	17	18	**Babydoll**	Dominic Fike	2	22
21	20	19	**Self Aware**	Temper City	19	14
18	19	20	**Golden**	HUNTR/X: EJAE, Audrey Nuna & REI AMI	1	55

BILLBOARD GLOBAL 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR SONGS BASED ON STREAMING AND SALES ACTIVITY FROM OVER 200 TERRITORIES AROUND THE WORLD — INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES — AS TRACKED BY LUMINATE. THE RANKING IS BASED ON A WEIGHTED FORMULA INCORPORATING OFFICIAL ONLY STREAMS ON BOTH SUBSCRIPTION AND AD-SUPPORTED TIERS OF LEADING AUDIO AND VIDEO MUSIC SERVICES, PLUS DOWNLOAD SALES FROM DIFFERENT RETAILERS ACROSS THE GLOBE. ALL CHARTS ILLUSTRATION BILLBOARD/LUMINATE. ©2026 PENSKE MEDIA CORPORATION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

STREAMING AND SALES DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

OMAR CAMACHO

NUNCA VOY A MORIR

AVAILABLE NOW

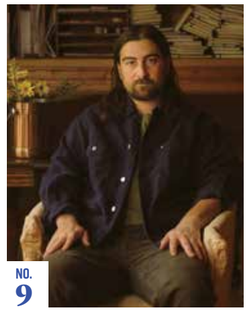
ARTIST 100

75

BEYONCÉ

WEEKS ON CHART
311

"Morning Dew (Donk)," Beyoncé's first release since her 2024 album, *Cowboy Carter*, debuts at No. 4 on Hot R&B Songs. Its official release on July 4 follows a years-old leaked demo. The track, which drew 8.5 million U.S. streams through July 9, according to Luminate, introduces the 20th-anniversary edition of the superstar's album *B'Day*, due Sept. 4. —TREVOR ANDERSON



NO. **9**

Kahan Extends Streak

Noah Kahan reaches No. 1 on the Triple A Airplay chart with "Doors," marking both his fifth overall and consecutive entry to lead the list. His streak dates to 2023 with "Dial Drunk." "Doors" is his second leader of 2026 after an 11-week command for "The Great Divide" — both from *The Great Divide*, which topped the Billboard 200 for three weeks in May and has spent its first 11 weeks in the top 10. Only two acts have linked more consecutive No. 1s at the rock radio format: Hozier (also an active run since 2023) and U2 (2001-05), with six each.

—KEVIN RUTHERFORD

NO. **21**

Larsson Leads Again

Zara Larsson's "Midnight Sun" rises a notch to No. 1 on Hot Dance/Pop Songs, swapping spots with PinkPantheress' 20-week leader, "Stateside" (with Larsson). Plus, the Swedish singer-songwriter's "Lush Life," revived from 2016, holds at its No. 3 high. Already the first artist to simultaneously hold the top three spots on the chart in its two-year history, she has now occupied such real estate for seven weeks, including the past three in a row. On the Billboard Hot 100, "Midnight Sun" rises 17-16 for a new best, a step above "Stateside." The latter reached No. 6 in March, marking Larsson's first top 10.

—XANDER ZELLNER

Artist 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist	IMPRINT/LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
RE-ENTRY		1	#1 for 2 WEEKS **Madonna**	WARNER	1	11
4	3	2	**Morgan Wallen**	BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	383
1	2	3	**Olivia Rodrigo**	GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	1	224
2	4	4	**Michael Jackson**	MJJ/EPIC	1	538
5	6	5	**Ella Langley**	SAWGOD/COLUMBIA	1	96
3	5	6	**Drake**	OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	1	626
7	7	7	**Luke Combs**	SEVEN RIDGES/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	1	488
6	8	8	**Taylor Swift**	REPUBLIC	1	624
8	9	9	**Noah Kahan**	MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	153
9	10	10	**Bruno Mars**	ATLANTIC/AG	1	606
10	11	11	**Olivia Dean**	POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	3	44
66	62	12	**Sienna Spiro**	CAPITOL/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	12	26
13	12	13	**sombr**	SMB/WARNER	5	65
11	13	14	**Ariana Grande**	REPUBLIC	1	551
90	69	15	**Toby Keith**	SHOW DOG NASHVILLE/THIRTY TIGERS	2	32
16	22	16	**Fleetwood Mac**	WARNER/RHINO	3	379
12	14	17	**Justin Bieber**	JRC/ILH/DEF JAM/REPUBLIC	1	526
-	1	18	**ATEEZ**	UNIVERSAL SIGMA/UNIVERSAL/KQ/RCA/UME/HELLO82	1	54
19	15	19	**Riley Green**	NASHVILLE HARBOR/BMLG	15	97
15	16	20	**Bad Bunny**	RIMAS	1	407

BEYONCÉ: GILBERT FLORES; KAHAN: PATRICK MCCORMACK; LARSSON: MICHAEL BUCKNER

AIRPLAY, SALES & AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD ARTIST 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ARTISTS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY ALBUM AND TRACK SALES, AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AND AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS. SEE BILLBOARD.COM/ARTICLE/ARTIST-100-CHART-EXPLANATION/ FOR MORE DETAILS. LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2026 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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VARIETY

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RollingStone

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"Olivia Rodrigo has no problem continuing her domination of pop"
CONSEQUENCE

GEFFEN

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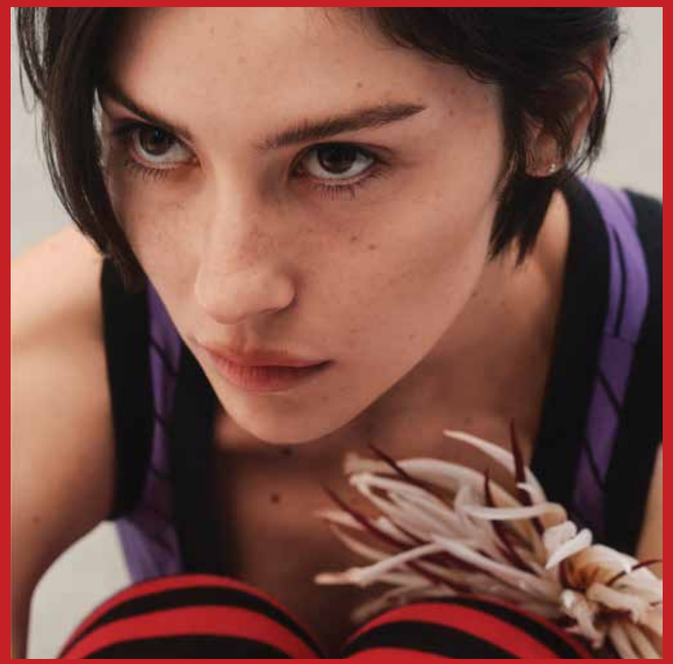
(Gracie Abrams)
Daughter from Hell

Out Now

“ Gracie Abrams Kicks Off New Era With Devastatingly Great ‘Hit the Wall’ ”

– Rolling Stone



“ It’s the best thing she’s ever done. ”

– NPR
All Songs Considered

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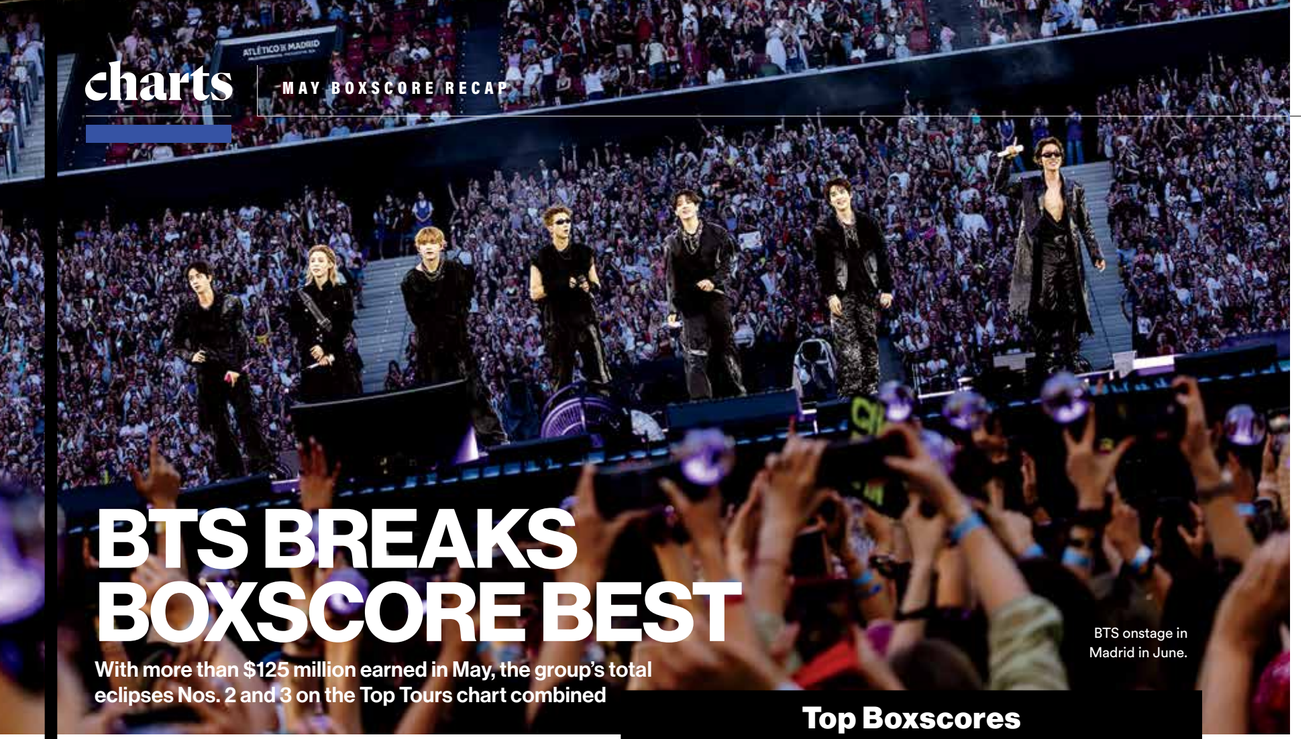

BTS BREAKS BOXSCORE BEST

With more than $125 million earned in May, the group's total eclipses Nos. 2 and 3 on the Top Tours chart combined

BTS onstage in Madrid in June.

BTS RETURNED TO THE BILLBOARD BOXSCORE charts in a big way in April in support of its Billboard 200-topping album *ARIRANG*, leading Top Tours for the first time in four years. The group not only retained the crown in May — it also smashed a chart record.

According to figures reported to Boxscore, BTS grossed $127.8 million and sold 641,000 tickets over 12 shows between May 2 and May 28, repeating as the month's highest-grossing and best-selling touring act. The monthly gross becomes the largest by a group since the chart began in 2019, surpassing The Rolling Stones' $95 million in August 2019 by 35%.

After opening its world tour on top, BTS increased its monthly revenue by 68% from April to May, and attendance surged by 54%. The act's April schedule included three shows in Tampa, Fla., and stadium dates in Japan and South Korea, while May's slate was exclusively in North America: nine shows in the United States and three in Mexico.

Ticket prices are higher across the board in the United States, and despite the group being from South Korea, BTS sold more tickets per market stateside, with more shows in bigger stadiums. The tour peaked in Las Vegas, with 246,000 tickets sold and $49.5 million grossed at Allegiant Stadium (May 23-24, 27-28), easily landing the four-show run at No. 1 on Top Boxscores. **—ERIC FRANKENBERG**

Top Tours

	Artist	Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1	BTS	$127.8M	641K	12
2	Metallica	$72.6M	506K	7
3	Bad Bunny	$52.4M	363K	6
4	Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band	$50.8M	193K	10
5	No Doubt	$41.9M	193K	12
6	Ne-Yo & Akon	$33.6M	336K	23
7	Luke Combs	$32.9M	255K	5
8	George Strait	$26.5M	120K	3
9	TWICE	$19.9M	121K	9
10	Diljit Dosanjh	$19.4M	133K	10

Top Boxscores

	Artist(s) / Venue / Date	Gross / Ticket Prices	Total Attendance / No. Of Shows	Promoter(s)
1	BTS ALLEGIANT STADIUM, LAS VEGAS MAY 23-24, 27-28	$49.5M $649.50/$69.50	246,000 4	HYBE, Live Nation
2	BTS STANFORD STADIUM, STANFORD, CALIF. MAY 16-17, 19	$30.5M $649.50/$69.50	152,000 3	HYBE, Live Nation
3	BTS ESTADIO GNP SEGUROS, MEXICO CITY MAY 7, 9-10	$27.8M $729.27/$82.35	146,000 3	HYBE, Live Nation, OCESA
4	BTS SUN BOWL, EL PASO, TEXAS MAY 2-3	$20M $649.50/$69.50	97,700 2	HYBE, Live Nation
5	Bad Bunny RIYADH AIR METROPOLITANO, MADRID MAY 30-31	$18.8M $233.03/$81.56	124,000 2	Live Nation
6	Bad Bunny ESTADI OLIMPIC LLUIS COMPANYS, BARCELONA MAY 22-23	$18.3M $232.26/$81.29	116,000 2	Live Nation
7	George Strait CLEMSON MEMORIAL STADIUM, CLEMSON, S.C. MAY 2	$16.8M $3,161/$58	90,000 1	Messina Touring Group/AEG Presents
8	System of a Down ESTADIO GNP SEGUROS, MEXICO CITY MAY 27-28	$16.6M $130.69	127,000 2	OCESA
9	Metallica DEUTSCHE BANK PARK, FRANKFURT, GERMANY MAY 22, 24	$15.5M $347.23/$75.49	125,000 2	Live Nation
10	Bad Bunny ESTADIO DA LUZ, LISBON, PORTUGAL MAY 26-27	$15.2M $232.82/$69.84	122,000 2	Live Nation

HYBE (BIGHIT MUSIC

Top Venues

15,001 OR MORE CAPACITY

	Venue / Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1	Sphere LAS VEGAS	$48.9M	226,000	14
2	O2 Arena LONDON	$34.4M	358,000	23
3	Madison Square Garden NEW YORK	$19.7M	101,000	7
4	Ziggo Dome AMSTERDAM	$15.1M	171,000	12
5	Palacio de los Deportes MEXICO CITY	$15M	198,000	12
6	Movistar Arena SANTIAGO, CHILE	$12.9M	176,000	19
7	Prudential Center NEWARK, N.J.	$12.7M	77,800	7
8	Co-Op Live MANCHESTER, ENGLAND	$11.5M	116,000	7
9	State Farm Arena ATLANTA	$10.8M	92,200	7
10	UBS Arena ELMONT, N.Y.	$10.3M	83,000	7

Diljit Dosanjh

10,001-15,000 CAPACITY

	Venue / Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1	Moody Center AUSTIN	$17.5M	109,000	12
2	Hallenstadion ZURICH	$11.4M	111,000	11
3	3Arena DUBLIN	$8.4M	97,900	8
4	Brisbane Entertainment Centre BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA	$6.4M	76,500	9
5	Dickies Arena FORT WORTH, TEXAS	$5.9M	82,200	10
6	OVO Hydro GLASGOW	$5.5M	79,100	9
7	Movistar Arena BOGOTA, COLOMBIA	$5M	72,100	8
8	Utilita Arena BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND	$4.3M	42,600	3
9	Uber Arena BERLIN	$3.4M	22,600	2
10	CFG Bank Arena BALTIMORE	$2.8M	43,900	6

DOSANJH: TODD OWYOUNG/NBC/GETTY IMAGES. NO DOUBT: JOHN SKEAFER

No Doubt

5,001-10,000 CAPACITY

	Venue / Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1	Red Rocks Amphitheatre MORRISON, COLO.	$16.8M	211,000	29
2	Auditorio Nacional MEXICO CITY	$12.4M	156,000	22
3	TikTok Entertainment Centre SYDNEY	$7.2M	61,600	9
4	The Anthem WASHINGTON, D.C.	$3.2M	48,600	12
5	Texas Trust CU Theatre DALLAS	$3.1M	34,000	11
6	YouTube Theater INGLEWOOD, CALIF.	$2.6M	25,000	7
7	Hearst Greek Theatre BERKELEY, CALIF.	$2.6M	31,200	4
8	Bill Graham Civic Auditorium SAN FRANCISCO	$2.4M	35,200	5
9	Under the K Bridge BROOKLYN	$2.2M	26,100	3
10	Mohegan Sun Arena UNCASVILLE, CONN.	$2M	33,100	6

2,500 OR LESS CAPACITY

	Venue / Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1	Ryman Auditorium NASHVILLE	$2.4M	35,400	21
2	Olympia Theatre DUBLIN	$1.4M	30,500	30
3	Mtelus MONTREAL	$1.3M	32,900	21
4	Showbox SoDo SEATTLE	$1.1M	25,800	18
5	The Novo LOS ANGELES	$1.1M	21,600	13
6	The Castro Theatre SAN FRANCISCO	$1.1M	17,100	14
7	Ruth Eckerd Hall CLEARWATER, FLA.	$1M	13,600	8
8	Cliffs Pavilion SOUTHEND-ON-SEA, ENGLAND	$950K	13,000	9
9	The Eastern ATLANTA	$851K	17,200	10
10	Webster Hall NEW YORK	$849K	21,700	22

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SIENNA SPIRO

Visitor

The Debut Album

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YOU STOLE THE SHOW & THE VISITOR

"...One of the greatest voices of her generation... she's likely to be entertaining us for decades to come."

VARIETY

"Die on This Hill (is) a showstopping pop-soul ballad built around tolling piano chords and Spiro's titanic vocal."

Los Angeles Times

PG. 26 A CATALOG MARKET SHUFFLE
PG. 28 INSIDE CAA'S EXECUTIVE SEARCH TEAM
PG. 30 REMEMBERING CLIVE DAVIS

Clockwise from left: Ella Langley, BTS, Drake, PinkPantheress and Noah Kahan.

LANGLEY: CHRISTOPHER POLK; BTS: BIGHIT MUSIC; DRAKE: SIMONE JOYNER/GETTY IMAGES; PINKPANTHERESS: KATIE FLORES; KAHAN: ATERCA RECORDMASK

REPUBLIC, Interscope Storm Back, Atlantic Stays Hot In Q2

Despite a lackluster (by REPUBLIC standards) first three months of the year, big albums by Drake and Noah Kahan have the label surging in current market share at the halfway mark of 2026

BY DAN RYS // ILLUSTRATION BY SELMAN HOŞGÖR

AFTER AN UNCHARACTERISTIC downturn in the first quarter, during which its industry-leading current market share dipped below 10% for the first time in five years, REPUBLIC stormed back at the midyear point of 2026, spurred on by releasing two of the biggest albums of the second quarter: Drake's *Iceman* and Noah Kahan's *The Great Divide*, released in May and April, respectively. Those two albums helped the label — which includes Republic Records, Island, Universal Records, Mercury and Big Loud in its market share — post an 11.43% current share halfway through the year, making it the biggest label by share of album consumption units by nearly three percentage points. (Current is defined as albums released within the past 18 months.)

Atlantic Music Group — which includes 10K Projects and 300 Entertainment in its share — maintained its second-place status, which it climbed to in the first quarter after a corporate realignment brought 10K into the fold, with projects by Bruno Mars and Don Toliver continuing to deliver big streaming numbers. At 8.50%, Atlantic edges out Interscope Geffen A&M, which came in third at 8.14%, a recovery for the label, which had also dipped in the first quarter but stormed back with a smash project from Olivia Rodrigo, which has posted nearly 1 million units already despite being out for less than a month. When factoring in the East Coast-West Coast structure of the Universal labels, the combined Interscope Capitol leads with a 12.87% current share, while the Republic Collective, inclusive of Def Jam, stands at 12.19%.

Those resurgences from REPUBLIC and Interscope helped drive parent company Universal Music Group to a 32.44% current share, up from a 30.76% mark in the first quarter. While that's down from last year's 36.03% at midyear, it keeps UMG five points above Sony Music, its closest competitor, which comes in at No. 2 with 27.41% in current share. That's down from the first quarter's 28.62% mark but a year-over-year boost from last year's 26.95% at midyear. Warner Music Group posted a 17.10% mark, also down from the first quarter

DistroKid was acquired by **CVC Capital Partners**.

Firebird Music entered the catalog market with a $750 million fund supported in part by investment firms **Ares** and **The Raine Group**.

IHeartMedia cut dozens of on-air jobs and other positions as part of a restructuring of its programming division.

The **National Music Publishers' Association** signed licensing deals with AI music firms **Udio** and **KLAY**.

(17.98%) but up from the 16.38% it held at this point in 2025. Meanwhile, the independent community, by distribution ownership, reached 23.06% in current share at midyear, which is up significantly from the 20.64% it held midway through last year. What's more, by label ownership, indie labels collectively command a 43.79% current share of the market, nearly double that of UMG (22.64%).

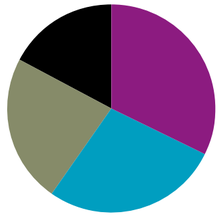
Beyond the top three, Columbia jumps into fourth place, as the release of Ella Langley's *Dandelion* album and its long-running Billboard Hot 100 No. 1, "Choosin' Texas," help the company to a 5.40% share, keeping pace with its first-quarter mark and a big jump from the 4.37% it posted halfway through 2025, when it ranked sixth. Columbia's rise comes at the expense of Warner Records, which slips to fifth with 5.11%, down from 5.51% in the first quarter and 6.21% six months into 2025. Capitol Music Group (which encompasses Motown/Quality Control, Astralwerks, Blue Note and some of Virgin Music) came in sixth with a 4.74% current share, up almost half a percentage point from the 4.32% it posted at midyear 2025, when it was seventh.

Capitol moved up as RCA slipped to seventh with 2.99%, dipping from last year's fifth position, when it was at 4.46%. Rounding out the top 10 are a trio of Sony labels: Alamo Records, which includes indie distributor Santa Anna, at 2.03%; Sony Nashville, at 1.87%; and Sony Latin, at 1.65%. Alamo and Sony Latin slipped year over year, while Sony Nashville, somewhat improbably, posted the exact same mark.

Overall market share — which encompasses all of a label's releases, both current and catalog — shows the strength of catalog overall, as UMG earned 38.22% of the market, down only slightly from the 38.57% it posted midway through last year despite its current share being down 4% year over year. Sony and Warner both grew year over year in overall share, with the former up to 28.03% from 27.69% and the latter up to 18.92% from 18.71%. The indies, by distribution ownership, dipped slightly to 14.83% from 15.02% in 2025.

Among the individual labels, REPUBLIC and Interscope are nearly identical atop the business, with REPUBLIC posting a 9.7334% overall share, just barely edging Interscope's 9.7332% — an almost negligible difference in overall units. Meanwhile, Atlantic's extensive catalog brings its overall share to 9.15%, with Warner Records (6.74%) and Capitol Music Group (5.64%) rounding out the top five. In terms of pure catalog share — albums older than 18 months — Interscope leads the industry with a 10.20% share, with Atlantic coming in second (9.34%) and REPUBLIC slotting into third (9.23%). b

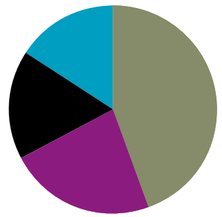
Current Market Share By Distribution Ownership



Universal Music Group **32.44%**
Indies **23.06%**
Sony Music Group **27.41%**
Warner Music Group **17.10%**

Rank	Label	Percentage
1	REPUBLIC	11.43%
2	Atlantic Music Group	8.50%
3	Interscope Geffen A&M	8.14%
4	Columbia Records	5.40%
5	Warner Records	5.11%
6	Capitol Music Group	4.74%
7	RCA Records	2.99%
8	Alamo Records	2.03%
9	Sony Nashville	1.87%
10	Sony Music Latin	1.65%
11	Epic Records	1.37%
12	Concord	0.82%
13	Def Jam Recordings	0.76%
14	MCA	0.76%
15	Disney Music Group	0.54%

Current Market Share By Label Ownership



Indies **43.79%**
Warner Music Group **16.44%**
Universal Music Group **22.64%**
Sony Music Group **15.55%**

Current market share through July 2.
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Post Malone and Swae Lee's "Sunflower," from *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

INVESTORS CASH OUT — AND THE CATALOG MARKET HITS ITS FIRST GROWTH MILESTONE

Anthem, Iconoclast and Crescendo are among the music rights catalog companies that are now up for sale

AMID THE FLURRY OF MERGERS, acquisitions and asset sales that have taken place in the music industry this year, the pending sales of three scaled music rights catalog companies — Anthem, Iconoclast and Crescendo — are a sign that the catalog investment market is approaching a significant milestone.

Since 2018, when Hipgnosis Songs Fund listed on the London Stock Exchange and raised £200 million ($260 million) to invest in music intellectual property, the market for music as an "investible asset," as Hipgnosis founder Merck Mercuriadis described it, has grown by the tens of billions. Over that period, private equity firms, insurance companies, pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, global private credit investors and family offices have all been drawn to the annuity-like returns music royalties provide in the streaming era, which have tripled against expectations in some cases since 2020.

Jimmy Stone, managing partner at Alderbrook, which advises on music investing, wrote in a recent research note that market activity in the first quarter, like Primary Wave's acquisition of indie publisher Kobalt, signals that activity is now shifting from catalog acquisitions to the consolidation of scaled companies. And the backers of Anthem, Crescendo, Iconoclast and others are attempting to seize this moment and exit their music investments on a high note.

Anthem Entertainment, whose portfolio includes assets from Rush, Timbaland and the *Spider-Man* franchise, is nearing a sale to Influence Media. The main owner of Anthem, the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, previously went to market to sell the fund in 2017 and 2022, but those auctions came in below expectations. This time, around a dozen parties bid between $500 million and $600 million. Influence Media, backed by BlackRock, bid slightly above $650 million, sources say.

Global private markets investment firm Northleaf Capital is in advanced talks to sell the Crescendo catalog — which contains Pete Townshend's publishing from his Who repertoire; T. Rex's publishing and masters; and Ingrid Michaelson's music assets — to Litmus Music for around $500 million, sources say. Litmus launched in 2022 with $500 million from private equity giant Carlyle Group and already has rights to music by Katy Perry, Benny Blanco and Keith Urban.

Iconoclast, the music rights and brand development company backed by the $2 trillion investment manager PIMCO, is in the final stages of a sale to Irving Azoff's Iconic Artists Group, according to three sources, with reports putting its price also around $500 million. Iconoclast has acquired select music rights to more than 30 catalogs, including Diplo's Mad Decent Publishing, David Cassidy, Marianne Faithfull, Tony Bennett and The Band's Robbie Robertson.

Stone says music catalog companies raised more than $4 billion in the first quarter this year, surpassing all of the capital acquisition funds raised in 2024 alone. That's plenty of dry powder for investment deals.

—ELIZABETH DILTS MARSHALL AND ED CHRISTMAN

EVERY NOTE.
EVERY ARTIST.
EVERY MOMENT.

THANK YOU, CLIVE.

COURTESY OF REPUBLIC RECORDS

SONY MUSIC GROUP

Merlin and music tech investment firm **Jamen Capital** said they plan to buy **Curve Royalty Systems** from **Virgin Music Group**.

Suno raised around $400 million in a funding round led by **OpenAI** and **Bond Capital**.

Sony Music executive vp of business affairs **Julie Swidler** stepped down at the end of June after 18 years.

Frank Rogers was named CEO of **Spirit Music Group**.

From The Desks Of...

JOE BECHER AND ANDREW MACKERETH

FOUNDER/GLOBAL MANAGING PARTNER, CAA EXECUTIVE SEARCH; MANAGING PARTNER FOR MUSIC AND ENTERTAINMENT, CAA EXECUTIVE SEARCH

BY ELIZABETH DILTS MARSHALL

FOR THE PAST DECADE, the headhunters at CAA's Executive Search division have been the networkers connecting top power players in sports, entertainment, finance and music companies with the people who will become their deputies, board directors and executives.

Founded by CAA global managing partner Joe Becher in October 2016, the group has helped staff the C-suites and board rooms of Universal Music Group, Recognition and Pophouse, as well as live-music and streaming companies, distributors and music technology startups.

"It really came together because of the connectivity of CAA's platform, the knowledge we have about entertainment in general and the access that CAA has to clients and talent," Becher says in late April at CAA's New York offices in the Chrysler Building. "We'll probably do 100 searches [out of a total of 550] for music companies this year. It's a big business for us."

Andrew Mackereth, managing partner for music and entertainment, leads the music industry search team. He says the job allows them to observe how music industry leaders think about capitalizing on the influx of institutional investor capital and how global investors chose companies and leaders to work with.

"We see more companies every year partnering with very, very smart capital. It has created great opportunities for growth and for leaders to find new opportunities," says Mackereth, who is based in London. "We've definitely been a window for private equity firms to look into the music industry and identify the right people to help them run their companies, whether it's the right CFO, chief people officer, the right marketing officers. We know where to look for those exact individuals within the music industry [and] in tangential industries."

Mackereth (left) and Becher

As the industry changes — with a more tech-first focus and more private equity and investment money — Becher and Mackereth's services are in demand more than ever. And in this current ultra-competitive labor market, Becher and Mackereth have a perspective on the skills that music industry leaders are looking for, the quixotic ways in which major companies have vetted top candidates and the missteps that can mean game over for even the most experienced professionals.

"I think at board level and C-suites, including the CEO, [it is] a jigsaw puzzle, and you have to make sure that you have the right piece so that the company can operate effectively," Becher says. "We do a lot of the hiring for organizations, but we can also help them think through how they structure [their company] to make sure that all characteristic skill sets are present."

Why did you found CAA Executive Search?

JOE BECHER I think CAA recognized they were doing search anyway, but not in a structured, professional manner. They would get asked by somebody that runs a studio, "Who should we hire for this and that?" And they'd come up with names. The more we did it, the more we realized, "We can serve our clients even better if we create a dedicated practice that actually focuses on professional search and processes." We started doing sports, then broader entertainment, movie studios, production companies, and about three years in we started doing music. Universal Music Group became our first big music client.

ANDREW MACKERETH No one was really doing search in music, and if they were, it was somewhere down the hierarchy. We had a lot of fun exploring that and educating the market. Fast forward to now, we're seeing more private equity firms, [venture capital] firms, any kind of financial institution that sees huge value in the music industry, in acquiring catalogs and in the live space as well.

Once you find candidates, how do you vet them?

MACKERETH Site visits. Many hourlong phone calls, followed by an additional half hour to an hour with each of the other stakeholders. Group calls as well as individual calls. It can really rack up.

BECHER We have lots of assessment tools that we use. Some clients will ask for different psychometric tools. A client wouldn't make a hiring decision based purely on it, but it is a tool to understand the candidate better, to figure out how to work with them, get the best out of them, develop them, promote them. It's not like a lie detector test, but they definitely ask a whole series of online questions, and it can get pretty good senses around strengths and weaknesses and personalities.

We had one client for a long time that used this same doctor that lived in the middle of nowhere. The final candidate would always go and spend a weekend at this guy's hunting lodge in the Carolinas. You would go and stay with Dr. Hodge and his wife and spend the weekend, and he'd come back with an entire assessment around the candidate, whether he thought the person was a good cultural fit for the particular organization.

Do you think you've contributed to the financial world's view that music is an increasingly valuable asset?

MACKERETH I don't want to claim too much credit. [As a window for private equity] we've been opening their eyes to how strong the talent in this space is. One thing you can't get away from is that relationships matter in the music industry. So understanding who the right individuals are, who have the right relationships, is important. We can help them navigate that and help translate the music industry to them.

Compared with the other industries you focus on, what could music do better?

BECHER The music industry does get criticized for being insular. Relationships are so important in this industry, as is the knowledge and the expertise. A lot of what we do is spend time with very senior executives who are in current roles and understand what is going to motivate them to move. There's always going to be certain roles within music that have to go to people within music. I think the companies that are doing it well are recognizing that there's certain functions within businesses where you don't need music people, where you can bring in other experts that have knowledge and backgrounds in different industries. With AI and data becoming so, so important, the music industry probably will look outside of music for those sorts of roles.

MACKERETH No organizations are exactly the same. If it's a music technology company, then you can look at product executives who might have been successful in other industries. But if we're hiring an executive who needs to have A&R experience, then obviously we're going to be looking within the music industry.

What companies have done this best?

BECHER [Warner Music Group CEO] Robert Kyncl is an example of a blurred line — a business guy that obviously has a ton of connectivity and knowledge of music from YouTube and his previous background.

MACKERETH The best examples are CEOs with great self-awareness and the board has great self-awareness. And you might come into that role with the strength in financial engineering or A&R or whatever it might be, but it's having the self-awareness to know where you need support and to hire the right people around you.

Do most major music companies have formal succession plans?

MACKERETH With the labels, you've got a really clear example of very successful CEOs running their organizations for long periods of time and continuity can be a great driver of growth for a business. Every organization needs to be thinking strategically about what the bench looks like underneath that CEO and if it's likely that we're going to be able to promote from within. If so, is there any work that needs to be done with the future leadership to get them ready for that change? I think that they are well-run organizations with very strong leadership teams who are going to be ready to take up the reins as and when a change might be needed. We've seen very successful transitions with Apple and recently Spotify. Just because you might not be aware that these conversations and forward planning is taking place doesn't necessarily mean that it's not.

> **"Every organization needs to be thinking strategically about what the bench looks like underneath that CEO and if it's likely that we're going to be able to promote from within."** —Mackereth

What is your biggest pet peeve?

BECHER Punctuality is No. 1 on the list. If someone turns up late, then it's game over because they're going to turn up late for a client as well. If they're not punctual, if they don't turn up prepared, if they don't have questions and angles and thoughts around opportunities, then they're probably not going to represent us well with clients.

Why do you think there are so few women leaders in music?

MACKERETH It's fair to say there's work to be done. But on a positive note, every day we are engaging with more and more fantastic women who are coming up through the ranks. [The industry can help by] removing any barriers for entry. Merlin just announced an initiative to help female leaders within their organization. b

CAA

Clive Davis

1932-2026

BY PETE GANBARG

Davis at his Pre-Grammy Gala in Los Angeles on Jan. 31.

Pete Ganbarg, a two-time Grammy Award winner, worked with Clive Davis from 1997 to 2001 as senior director of A&R at Arista Records, where he A&R'd Santana's Supernatural *album, which sold more than 30 million copies worldwide and won nine Grammys in 2000. He then reunited with Davis, who died June 22, from 2004 to 2008 as an A&R consultant at J/RCA Records. Here, Ganbarg takes readers inside Davis' legendary A&R meetings.*

Clive treated A&R people almost like protected species. They were the most important people inside of his company because he realized that as an A&R if you can't do your job right and give the company the tools to work with, then the company can't do its job.

A&R meetings with Clive were never scheduled. You'd get a call at 9:30 in the morning: "A&R meeting at 10" or "A&R meeting right now." An A&R meeting was basically a day in the life of Clive Davis because you were spending so much time listening to music. It could be the artist is calling in and so he's talking to the artist about the music, while we are there helping, passing notes and things like that. It's really a lost art. You don't see that anymore. You could be sitting there, literally, from 10 a.m. to midnight. If you had another meeting, tough, cancel it.

Clive worked with a lot of artists who did not write their own songs, so you would have publishers and songwriters sending in songs to be considered for Whitney [Houston], for Aretha [Franklin], for, the [American] Idols, whoever was in cycle looking for material.

This was back in the pre-MP3 days. The [music] would literally — first on cassette and then on CD — be put in a folder called "the song folder." There was a Whitney folder, an Aretha folder, an Idols folder. Every CD was wrapped in a lyric sheet and went in the folder. There was never an agenda, but it was like, "OK, today's the day that we're going to talk about Whitney. Who's got the latest Whitney song file?" It would come in with seven or eight CDs. It would never pile up more than that because we would do this once a week, sometimes more than once a week. Everybody would have a lyric sheet and everybody would be listening.

Now it's about algorithms, TikTok, virality and influence. That had nothing to do with anything with Clive. It was always about the music.

I realized over time that he was not asking our opinion to influence his opinion; he already had his opinion. He was asking our opinion because we were stand-ins for the audience. He didn't want you to answer with words, he wanted you to answer with numbers. Clive just wanted to cut to the chase: "Is the song a hit or is it not a hit?" The scale was zero to 10. Nothing was a zero, nothing was a 10. A six was a pass, a seven was an album cut, an eight was a hit. Eight was rare air. You did not say the word "eight" unless you were ready to take a bullet for it, because hits were currency. So when you said eight, that's like trumpets blaring, that's like the gates of the kingdom opening.

Nothing was a two because it's like six was the word for two. Six, we don't need to talk about it. The A&R [executives] would get cute sometimes because if there was a song that was better than an album cut, but they didn't want to put their neck on the line that it was a hit, they would say, "Well, Clive, it's a 7.97275."

I remember listening to Whitney's comeback in the late '90s when I was there with "My Love Is Your Love," the Wyclef [Jean] song. That got hit scores across the board. It was like, "That's a smash." There was also a Whitney song that Rodney Jerkins did called "It's Not Right but It's Okay." Everyone was like, "That's an eight. That's a nine."

It was one thing to play a song when it's just Clive and the A&R people in the room, but if the artist was sitting in the room, how did you tell Clive that you think the song is a hit or not? So, like with baseball, we would come up with signals like a third base coach is flashing signs to the batter. So you'd suddenly put three fingers on your cheek. Clive would notice 10 minus three is a seven. He knew exactly what you were talking about.

Clive also had this crazy ability to predict the future. Sarah McLachlan had an album called *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* that came out in 1993. It was triple platinum, ultimately, in America. She took a while between that studio album and the next studio album, which was *Surfacing* in 1997. Clive said, "OK, this is what's going to happen. We've got 'Building a Mystery' out now. Second single is going to be 'Sweet Surrender,' third single is going to be 'Adia,' fourth single is probably going to be the biggest single, 'Angel.' They're all going to be hits, and we'll probably end up selling north of probably 6 or 7 million." He was exactly right, and that album sold 8 million copies. He was not only predicting the future, he was willing it.

He never got tired of listening to music. It was always whatever is out, whatever's new, whatever people are excited about, just to understand what keeps music moving forward.

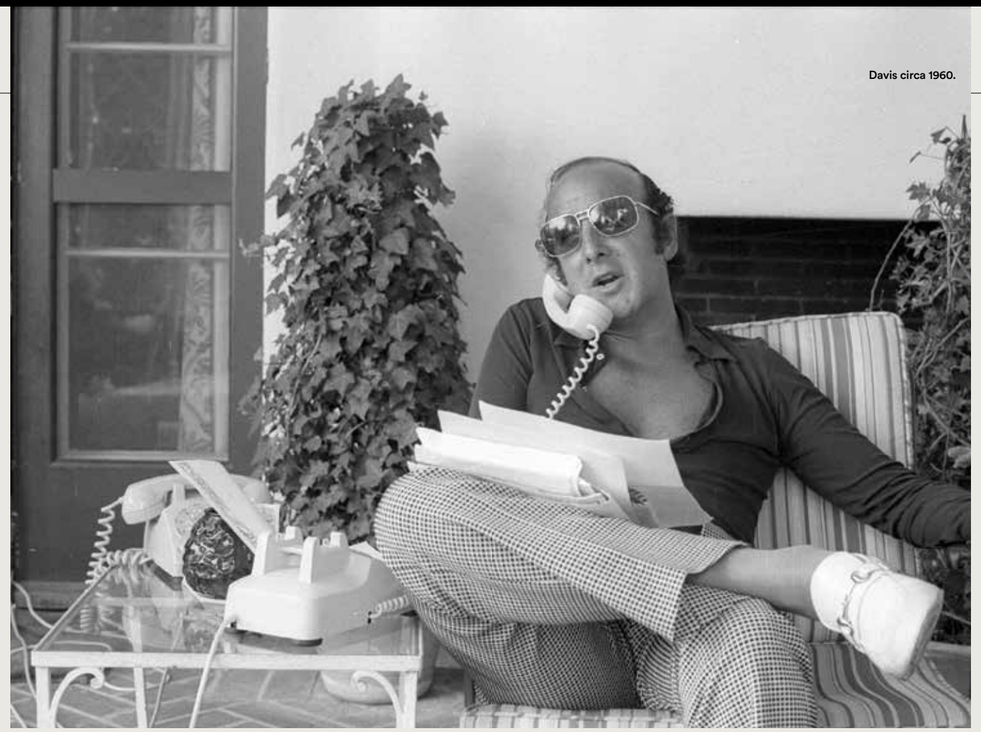
Every weekend his assistant would make him a cassette, and it would be all the new songs, and that's what he was listening to all weekend. He had a thirst to keep current. Nothing was ever too new or different for him not to try to understand why it was connecting with an audience. b

As told to Melinda Newman.

NYU
TISCH SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
CLIVE DAVIS INSTITUTE OF RECORDED MUSIC
THE CLIVE DAVIS VISION LIVES ON
DANIEL FRANGIOTTA

Clive Davis Remembered

From his early years at CBS and Columbia Records to his all-conquering runs atop Arista, J Records and beyond, Davis was a music man through and through. Here, 10 of his artists, collaborators and admirers reflect on Davis, who died at the age of 94 on June 22, and how the Man With the Golden Ears helped shape their respective careers.



Davis circa 1960.

Julie Swidler
Former executive vp of business affairs/general counsel, Sony Music Entertainment

Clive never, ever put people in a box. He didn't say to you, "Oh, you can't do that because that's not your job," or, "Stay in your lane." He tried to figure out what people's strengths were, and he had you work within those strengths, which was an amazing learning experience. So if he thought I was the right person to give comments to a songwriter on a song, he would have me do it. He would hold the bar really high, and I would sit there and say, "My God, I can't," and most of us were like that: "I can't possibly do that. What is he thinking?" And then you would accomplish it and you would go, "Oh, my God. He's going to expect me to do it again."

He expected so much of his people that he made you push yourself, because he pushed himself so much. People ask me sometimes, because I know there are so many different stories of Clive, "Did he really know what was going on with the business?" And the answer was yes. Every detail. He knew that it was better to leave some of this stuff to others, so that he could be the creative person that works with the artist. But he knew everything."

Rod Stewart

I remember distinctly one afternoon with Clive, Richard Perry, Arnold Stiefel and myself in a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Richard and I had recorded a couple of tracks for the first *Great American Songbook* [album]. Clive didn't like them and said, "They're not right. I want it more Fred and Ginger" [as in Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers]. Clive then stood up and started dancing around the room to make his point, then grabbed Arnold and made him his partner. So Richard and I followed suit and began dancing with each other around the room. Can you imagine four grown men dancing around the room with Clive shouting, "It must be more Fred and Ginger! It must be more Fred and Ginger!"

Rob Stringer
Chairman, Sony Music Group

Clive of course played a seminal role in the story of Sony Music through two incredible chapters, and he is responsible for a huge part of the recorded legacy of the company permanently. Not only are many, many artists we represent continuously indebted to his service but so many staff members have been influenced and mentored by his deep love and respect for our company, which he carried right up until today. Our working lives are better for having had his constant presence in the aura and perception of Sony Music.

Mickey Hart

Clive recognized that working with the Grateful Dead would be a new kind of challenge. He was known as a producer of hit songs, and when he signed us we said, "Hey, Clive, we don't make hit pop records." He laughed. We wanted everything our way. Clive came and made his case. He wanted to pick the songs and have a say in the production. But in the end, he felt that our way might just be the right way.

He told me once that we were his wild card, that his greatest challenge was to help the Grateful Dead make a hit. I think he relished the idea from the beginning. Soon after this, [Robert] Hunter and [Jerry] Garcia wrote "Touch of Grey." We recorded it and Clive was delighted when he heard it. "The Grateful Dead has a hit!" he screamed running up and down the hallway at Arista. "They have a hit!"

Bill Kreutzmann

Clive was different from the other suits for two reasons, both related — he actually cared about the artists that he worked with and Jerry didn't have a problem with him.

Narada Michael Walden
Producer/arranger for Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey and more

I did a song for an 11-year-old artist, Stacy Lattisaw, called "Let Me Be Your Angel" that was climbing the charts, and before I knew it Clive was calling me, asking, "How did you learn to make a record like that? You might want to come do some work for me." And that's how it began. He was a real fan of music. When he got excited, when he latched on with his heart to something he loved, everyone was going to hear it. When he would give me songs, I knew if I came to him and put on what they needed to be hits, they would be heard everywhere. He would say, "Go to your mountain to meditate and bring back some hits." He would fall in love with a demo. Even if there was a mistake, it would charm him and he would want that mistake to be kept.

He was extremely big-hearted. And he picked good people to work for him. The people who worked for him also had the fever. This guy Gerry Griffith [was the one] who called me first to get on Whitney Houston. I said, "But I'm on Aretha right now," and he said, "You don't want to miss this girl." When I first met her in the studio, I recognized this enormous sound and control from this beautiful stellar woman at 19. Just incredible.

DAVIS: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES. SWIDLER: MICHAEL KOVAC/WIREIMAGE. STEWART: JONNE/R.J. BUSKA/WIREIMAGE. STRINGER: JOHN SCHULLO/GETTY IMAGES. HART: ED PERLSTEIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES. WALDEN: LESTER COHEN/GETTY IMAGES. MANILOW: ROBIN PLATZER/GETTY IMAGES. GRAINGE: TAYLOR HILL/FILMMAGIC. GOLDSTUCK: FRAN MCGLOTTA/GETTY IMAGES.

Barry Manilow

I met Clive in 1974 when he took over Bell Records, the label I was on. He decided to keep three of us on his new label. He kept Melissa Manchester, me and of course... the Bay City Rollers. A few weeks after Bell Records became Arista, I got a phone call from Clive. He told me that he had a song that he thought I should consider recording. Record somebody else's song? I never considered that. But, since he was the boss, I listened to his song.

It was a rock song called "Brandy" that had been a minor hit in England, with a gruff-sounding lead singer. And it was totally wrong for me. But it was Clive Davis, my new president, so I recorded it. A week later, I met Clive in the recording studio and I played him the song he sent me with me singing the lead. Clive listened and said, "What's that?" I said, "Well, that's the song you sent me." "That's terrible," he replied. "I *know* it's terrible," I said. "But that's the song you sent me." We stood there, staring at each other, and finally I said, "Clive, come into the studio with me."

During the afternoon, in order to learn the song, I had played around with it. As I played "Brandy," I found the love song hiding in this rock song. So, I slowed it down, changed a lot of the chords and added a key change, and I started it gently and built it to a passionate ending. I played my version for him. He was quiet and then he said, "Just do that. Just do that."

"But we can't call it 'Brandy,' " I said. "Call it 'Mandy,' " he said. "OK," I replied.

Within a month, "Mandy" soared to No. 1 on the charts. That was the beginning of my relationship with Clive. He would show me a song, I would turn it down, we'd argue, I would rearrange it, I would record it. We would celebrate when they were hits, we would feel bad when they weren't. This went on for nearly 50 years. Clive has always been there for me. He believed in me from the very beginning. Boy, I'm gonna miss him. Who am I gonna argue with? Thanks for everything, my friend.

Lucian Grainge
Chairman/CEO, Universal Music Group

When I think back over more than four decades of friendship with Clive Davis, two moments always come to mind. In 1981, I was in a basement club on Baker Street in London to see a band I desperately wanted to sign: Haircut 100. The moment I saw Clive there, I knew they'd sign to Arista. I was introduced to him that night. As a young talent scout, I was completely intimidated.

A couple of years ago, I was in France and Allen Grubman invited me to lunch with Clive and his partner. It was an unforgettable afternoon, with Clive serving as an encyclopedic guide through the history of the music business, his years at CBS Records, the artists, the bets he made and why he made them. We never worked together, but I loved how he fused creative and commercial nous, setting the way for the modern music business.

My deepest, heartfelt condolences to his family, his four children and countless friends.

Charles Goldstuck
Founder/managing partner, GoldState Music

We joined forces well into his storied career. One could not wish for a greater friend or business partner. Our first test — and it was a big one — occurred in November 1999. Clive had been asked to have dinner with then-BMG Entertainment chairman Michael Dornemann and CEO Strauss Zelnick. They informed him that due to Bertelsmann's mandatory retirement age, which at the time was 60, he was being replaced as CEO of Arista Records and "moved into a chairman's role." Clive was 66. Clive walked out of the dinner, and when he got back to his apartment, he called me with the news. He was completely blindsided. As he said that evening, "Ahmet [Ertegun, founder and chairman of Atlantic Records and one of Davis' great rivals] is in his late 70s — I am a spring chicken as compared to him." He was, as he put it, "at the peak of my powers." Arista had released Carlos Santana's *Supernatural* album in June 1999. The album would go on to sell over 30 million albums and win nine Grammy Awards. Clive was at his best.

We assembled a team of advisers, including Allen Grubman, Joel Katz and Fred Davis, who helped plan Clive's next move. The end result of this upheaval was our launching J Records the next year. Our partner was Bertelsmann. Clive was on a mission. He called J Records an "instant major," and with a $150 million war chest — one of the biggest investments in a new music entity at the time — we were competitive. We competed with all the major labels. Our first office was half a floor in the Waldorf Hotel Towers. We removed all the hotel furniture and installed office furniture. The only problem was that the Waldorf was the locale of choice for U.S. presidents and world leaders.

A few weeks after moving in, we were paid a visit by the U.S. Secret Service. Bill Clinton, who was the president at the time, was coming to New York and was going to be in residence on the floor above us. The Secret Service needed to perform a security sweep of our various rooms. They came in with several German shepherd sniffer dogs and asked us to leave the premises while they conducted their sweep. These dogs had a ferocious look about them and were quite intimidating. Clive and I were sitting at his makeshift desk, grappling with completing Alicia Keys' debut album, *Songs in A Minor*. Clive calmly told the Secret Service agents that their German shepherds were disrupting important work, and could they come back tomorrow. They obeyed and came back later. Nothing could get in the way of the music. Not even the needs of the president of the United States of America. The artist always came first.

Don Ienner
Former chairman, Sony Music Group

At around 6 p.m., when things quieted down, a few nights a week Clive would call me up to his office. We would listen to new music that came in, some mixes, edits or songs he was gathering for our artists. There would be a nice chunk of Jarlsberg cheese and some Carrs crackers. Occasionally, there would be Absolut Vodka in his freezer and maybe we would have a drink, but mostly we would play music and make some singles decisions and I would give him the lay of the land in radio and marketing, which I was responsible for at that time. We would laugh a lot, talk sports and then get back into listening and listening and listening more.

Those candid moments with him would help shape my outlook, my dedication to excellence, and for that and so much more, I am eternally grateful to Clive for his unyielding desire to win, but with an elegance and warmth that he had in abundance. b

MEGAN MORONEY SLAYYYTER MILES CATON
BABY KEEM MALCOLM TODD

TAME IMPALA ELLA LANGLEY DOMINIC FIKE
HARRY STYLES ROSALÍA

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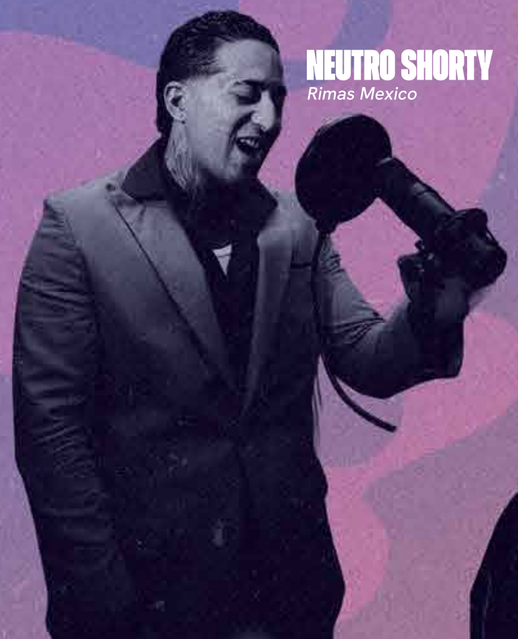

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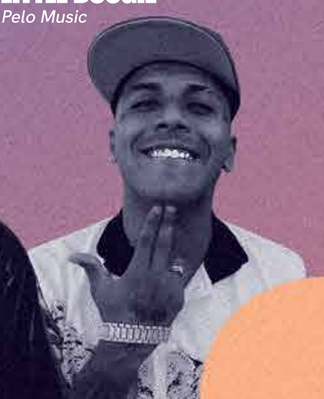

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2027 Grammys First Look

Billboard's early best bets for the 69th annual Grammy Awards, including how Taylor Swift and Paul McCartney could each make history and why a best new artist rule change works in Ella Langley's favor — plus a preview of who could be nominated at the Latin Grammys

By Paul Grein and Sigal Ratner-Arias

Illustrations by Mia Angioy

GRAMMY EARLY BEST BETS BY PAUL GREIN

Thanks to a rule change in the best new artist category that was announced in June, which allows an artist to be entered four times instead of three, Ella Langley could be nominated in four of the six general field categories at the 69th annual Grammy Awards — album, record and song of the year plus best new artist. If that happens, Langley would become the first country crossover artist to achieve the feat since Bobbie Gentry in 1968.

Olivia Dean, who won best new artist at the ceremony held earlier this year, could be nominated in the three other marquee categories for artists, as could Olivia Rodrigo, who won best new artist in 2022; and Noah Kahan, Bruno Mars, RAYE and Taylor Swift.

The eligibility period runs from Aug. 31, 2025, through Aug. 28, 2026. First-round voting will be conducted from Oct. 12 to Oct. 22. Nominations will be announced Nov. 16.

For the fourth year in a row, there will be eight nominees in each of these categories. With a little over a month left in the eligibility window, here are our best guesses for who will be nominated — listed in alphabetical order, followed by shortlists of 10 other possibilities, also listed in alphabetical order.

From left: Mars, Swift, Rosalía, Rodrigo and Kahan.

ALBUM OF THE YEAR

Paul McCartney and Taylor Swift are both going for history. If McCartney is nominated for *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*, it will be his record-extending 10th career nomination in this category. If Swift is nominated for *The Life of a Showgirl*, it will be her eighth nod in this category — more than anyone else in Grammy history for strictly solo albums. Swift is a better bet: She has been nominated in this category with each of her last four regular studio albums. McCartney was last nominated here in 2006.

OLIVIA DEAN

The Art of Loving

This is the English singer's second studio album. Dean produced it alongside Julian Bunetta, Leon Michels and John Ryan, among others. Bunetta and Ryan were both nominated in this category for work with Sabrina Carpenter in 2025, with Ryan also being nominated for work with the singer in 2026. Michels was nominated for work with Mary J. Blige and Lizzo, both in 2023. Billboard 200 peak: No. 3

NOAH KAHAN

The Great Divide

This is Kahan's fourth studio album and his first to top the Billboard 200. This would be his first nomination in this category. He was up for best new artist at the 2024 ceremony. He co-produced the album with Gabe Simon and Aaron Dessner. The latter was nominated in this category for three Taylor Swift albums: *folklore* (which won), *evermore* and *The Tortured Poets Department*. Billboard 200 peak: No. 1 (three weeks)

ELLA LANGLEY

Dandelion

Langley co-produced this, her sophomore album, with Miranda Lambert and Ben West. If Langley is nominated here, she won't be the first artist named Ella to land an album of the year nod: Ella Fitzgerald was nominated at the inaugural Grammy ceremony in 1959 for *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Irving Berlin Song Book*. Billboard 200 peak: No. 1 (two weeks)

BRUNO MARS

The Romantic

If *The Romantic*, which Mars co-produced with D'Mile, is nominated here, it will be Mars' first album to both top the Billboard 200 and land an album of the year nod. Two Mars albums — *Doo-Wops & Hooligans* and *24K Magic* — were nominated in this category (*24K Magic* won), but neither of them reached No. 1. Billboard 200 peak: No. 1 (one week)

RAYE

This Music May Contain Hope.

The English singer's second album has spawned three singles — "Where Is My Husband!" (a good bet for record and song of the year nods), "Nightingale Lane" and "Click Clack Symphony," the lattermost co-written with, co-produced by and featuring Academy Award-winning composer Hans Zimmer. Billboard 200 peak: No. 11

OLIVIA RODRIGO

you seem pretty sad for a girl so in love

Rodrigo's first two albums, *SOUR* and *GUTS*, were nominated here. Dan Nigro produced all three projects. Third album *you seem pretty sad for a girl so in love* is vying to become the second album with a 10-word title to land an album of the year nod, following Lana Del Rey's *Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*. Billboard 200 peak: No. 1 (two weeks)

ROSALÍA

LUX

Last year, when the Recording Academy invited members of the Latin Recording Academy to join its ranks, nearly 1,000 took the organization up on the offer. Their votes helped Bad Bunny's *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* become the first Spanish-language album to win album of the year. This year, Rosalía could become the first woman artist to land an album of the year nod with a Spanish-language album. Rosalía co-produced the album, her fourth studio set. Billboard 200 peak: No. 4

TAYLOR SWIFT

The Life of a Showgirl

As previously noted, Swift's last four studio albums (excluding rerecordings) were nominated in this category. If *The Life of a Showgirl* also makes it, she'll become just the second artist in Grammy history (following Kendrick Lamar) to be nominated with five consecutive studio albums. Swift produced her 12th studio album with Max Martin and Shellback. Billboard 200 peak: No. 1 (12 weeks)

WITHIN REACH

Jon Batiste, *Black Mozart*; **Cardi B**, *Am I the Drama?*; **Brandi Carlile**, *Returning to Myself*; **Ariana Grande**, *Petal* (due Aug. 2); **Kehlani**, *Kehlani*; **Paul McCartney**, *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*; **Megan Moroney**, *Cloud 9*; **Kacey Musgraves**, *Middle of Nowhere*; **Harry Styles**, *Kiss All the Time. Disco, Occasionally.*; **Don Toliver**, *Octane*

MARS: JOHN V. ESPARZA. RODRIGO: NICK WALKER. KAHAN: PATRICK MCCORMACK. ROSALÍA: ZAKH HUSSEIN. SWIFT: JOHN NACION.

RECORD OF THE YEAR

Some of the acts likely to be nominated here have multiple strong hits they could enter, so they'll have to decide which is their best bet. That's a nice problem to have. Olivia Dean could go with "Man I Need" or "So Easy (To Fall in Love)"; Olivia Rodrigo, with "drop dead" or "the cure"; Taylor Swift, with "The Fate of Ophelia," "Opalite" or "I Knew It, I Knew You" from *Toy Story 5*.

OLIVIA DEAN

"So Easy (To Fall in Love)"

This would be Dean's first nomination in this category. Zach Nahome co-produced the bossa nova-imbued pop smash with John Ryan, Julian Bunetta, Amy Allen and Max Wolfgang. Dean would be the third artist named Olivia to be nominated in this category: Olivia Newton-John won in 1975 for "I Honestly Love You," and Olivia Rodrigo has been nominated twice and could be headed for her third nod this year. Hot 100 peak: No. 5

NOAH KAHAN

"The Great Divide"

Kahan co-produced this hit with Gabe Simon. It could bring Kahan his first nomination in this category. The song was featured in an extended Mastercard ad during this year's Grammy telecast. Lady Gaga's "Abracadabra," which was featured in a similar ad during the 2025 telecast, landed a record of the year nod at this year's ceremony. Hot 100 peak: No. 6

ELLA LANGLEY

"Choosin' Texas"

This would be Langley's first nomination in this category and the first for a core country artist performing a country song since Lady A won for "Need You Now" in 2011. (Taylor Swift was well along on her transition to pop when "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" was nominated at the 2013 ceremony.) Langley co-produced the smash with Miranda Lambert and Ben West. Hot 100 peak: No. 1 (13 weeks)

BRUNO MARS

"I Just Might"

This would be Mars' eighth nomination in this category as an artist. Only Beyoncé has had more (nine). Mars performed "I Just Might," which he co-produced with D'Mile, during this year's Grammy telecast. Three times prior, Mars has performed just-released songs at the ceremony that went on to be nominated in this category the following year: "Grenade," "Locked Out of Heaven" and the Silk Sonic smash "Leave the Door Open." Hot 100 peak: No. 1 (two weeks)

RAYE

"Where Is My Husband!"

RAYE and Mike Sabath co-produced this irrepressible hit, a canny blend of old and new R&B sounds. RAYE has received four Grammy nods, including for best new artist at the 2025 ceremony. If this is nominated, this will be the second time in three years that a title that ends in an exclamation point has been up for record of the year: In 2025, Chappell Roan's "Good Luck, Babe!" was nominated. Hot 100 peak: No. 11

OLIVIA RODRIGO

"the cure"

This would be Rodrigo's third hit to be nominated in this category following "drivers license" and "vampire." Dan Nigro produced all three. Those first two contenders were the lead singles from Rodrigo's first two albums; "the cure" was the second single from her third album (following "drop dead"). *Billboard* ranked "the cure" at No. 1 on its midyear list "The 50 Best Songs of 2026 So Far (Staff Picks)." Hot 100 peak: No. 5 (so far)

SIENNA SPIRO

"Die on This Hill"

This stately power ballad echoes such early Adele records as "Chasing Pavements," which was nominated in this category in 2009. Omer Fedi, Michael Pollack and Blake Slatkin co-produced "Die on This Hill." Spiro's debut album, *Visitor*, arrived July 3. The more-or-less title track, "The Visitor," debuted and peaked at No. 43 on the Hot 100 in March. Hot 100 peak: No. 19

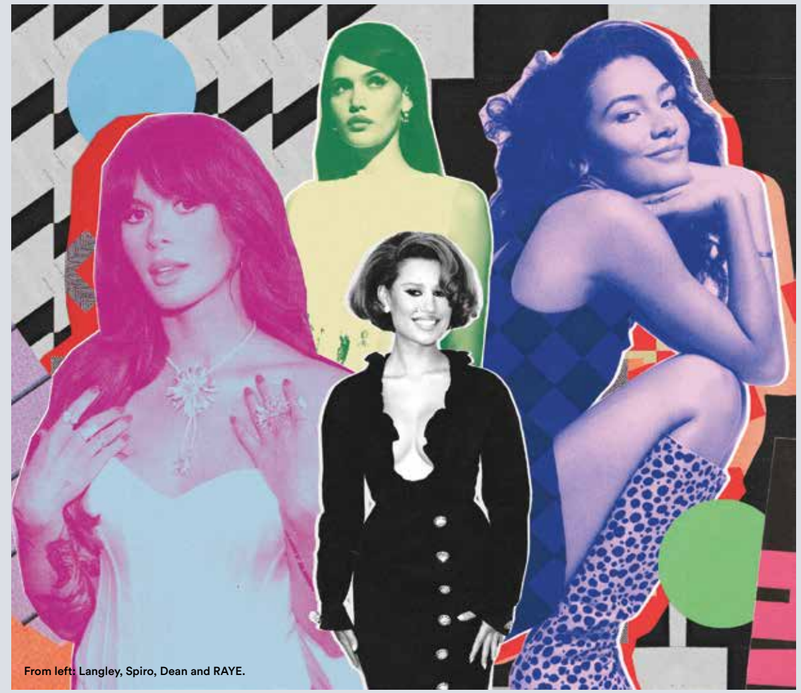
TAYLOR SWIFT

"The Fate of Ophelia"

This would be Swift's seventh nod in this category. She co-produced the smash with Max Martin and Shellback, with whom she also collaborated on three previous record of the year nominees: "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," "Shake It Off" and "Blank Space." This became Swift's longest-running No. 1 hit, an impressive feat for someone so deep into her career. Hot 100 peak: No. 1 (10 weeks)

WITHIN REACH

Gracie Abrams, "Hit the Wall"; **Bella Kay**, "iloveitiloveitiloveit"; **BTS**, "Swim"; **Ariana Grande**, "Hate That I Made You Love Me"; **Kacey Musgraves**, "Dry Spell"; **PinkPantheress featuring Zara Larsson**, "Stateside" remix; **Rosalía featuring Yahritza Y Su Esencia**, "La Perla"; **sombr**, "Homewrecker"; **Harry Styles**, "Aperture"; **Tame Impala & Jennie**, "Dracula (Remix)"



From left: Langley, Spiro, Dean and RAYE.

LANGLEY: CHRISTOPHER POLK. SPIRO: MATHIAS APAR. DEAN: LOLA MANGELL. RAYE: JOHN NACION.

SONG OF THE YEAR

At the 2026 ceremony, seven of the record of the year nominees were also nominees in this category. In 2025, five releases were cited in both categories. In 2027, seven releases may double up again. (And to answer the most-asked question about the Grammys: Record of the year honors a particular recording of a song. Song of the year honors the song itself.)

Clockwise from left: Allen, Nigro, Fedi, Lambert, D'Mile and Antonoff.

"CHOOSIN' TEXAS"

Songwriters Ella Langley, Luke Dick, Miranda Lambert, Joybeth Taylor

Lambert has received seven Grammy nominations for best country song, including for her own "Bluebird," on which Dick was also a co-writer. This would be the first songwriting nomination for Langley and Taylor. "Choosin' Texas" would be the fourth song with a state name in its title to receive a song of the year nod following "Hotel California," "Theme From New York, New York" and "Texas Hold 'Em."

"DIE ON THIS HILL"

Songwriters Sienna Spiro, Omer Fedi, Michael Pollack

Fedi was nominated in this category for the 2026 awards for co-writing "APT." by Bruno Mars and Rosé and for the 2022 awards for co-writing Lil Nas X's "Montero (Call Me by Your Name)." Pollack was nominated at the 2024 ceremony for co-writing Miley Cyrus' "Flowers." This would be Spiro's first nod.

"THE CURE"

Songwriters Olivia Rodrigo, Dan Nigro

Rodrigo and Nigro were nominated in this category for co-writing "drivers license" and "vampire." Nigro had a third nomination for co-writing Chappell Roan's "Good Luck, Babe!" The Cure (the English band, not the song title) is well-represented on Rodrigo's album. The song "drop dead" mentions the group's 1987 hit "Just Like Heaven" while frontman Robert Smith appears on "what's wrong with me."

"THE GREAT DIVIDE"

Songwriters Noah Kahan, Gabe Simon

This would be Kahan's first nod in a songwriting category and Simon's first nomination, period. Kahan's only previous nominations are for best new artist in 2025 and best country duo/group performance earlier this year for "Cowboys Cry Too," a collaboration with Kelsea Ballerini (who is also a former best new artist nominee).

"I JUST MIGHT"

Songwriters Bruno Mars, Dernst Emile II, Philip Lawrence, Brody Brown

All four co-writers of this pop smash have been previously nominated multiple times in this category. Mars has had seven nominations and is currently just one shy of Taylor Swift and Jack Antonoff for the most nods in the history of the category. Lawrence and Brown have each had five nods; D'Mile, three.

"I KNEW IT, I KNEW YOU"

Songwriters Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff

As noted, Swift and Antonoff are currently tied for the most nods (eight) in the history of the category. (Curiously, Swift has yet to win.) Why would Swift's camp enter this Hot 100 No. 1 from *Toy Story 5* rather than one of her smashes from *The Life of a Showgirl*? A nod in the Grammys' highest-profile songwriting category would put a spotlight on the tune during the Academy Awards' voting season. (Preliminary Oscar voting begins Dec. 7.)

"SO EASY (TO FALL IN LOVE)"

Songwriters Olivia Dean, Amy Allen, John Ryan, Max Wolfgang

Grammy magnet Amy Allen co-wrote this song (and wasn't involved with Dean's other smash, "Man I Need"), which might make this the shrewder entry. Allen has been nominated three times in this category. Moreover, she won songwriter of the year, non-classical the last two years running.

"WHERE IS MY HUSBAND!"

Songwriters RAYE, Mike Sabath

RAYE and Sabath won a songwriting Grammy earlier this year, the Harry Belafonte Song for Social Change Award for "Ice Cream Man," which they co-wrote with BloodPop. Raye received the Hal David Starlight Award at the Songwriters Hall of Fame gala in June, another sign of respect for her songwriting.

WITHIN REACH

"Aperture" (Harry Styles); **"Church & State"** (Brandi Carlile); **"Dracula Remix"** (Tame Impala and Jennie); **"Dry Spell"** (Kacey Musgraves); **"Hate That I Made You Love Me"** (Ariana Grande); **"Hit the Wall"** (Gracie Abrams); **"Homewrecker"** (sombr); **"iloveitiloveitiloveit"** (Bella Kay); **"La Perla"** (Rosalía featuring Yahritza Y Su Esencia); **"Streets of Minneapolis"** (Bruce Springsteen)

NIGRO: FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES. ALLEN: JULIAN HAMILTON/WIREIMAGE. FEDI: JON KOPALOFF/GETTY IMAGES. LAMBERT: CHRISTOPHER POLK. ANTONOFF: TAYLOR HILL/WIREIMAGE. D'MILE: REBECCA SAPP/GETTY IMAGES.

BEST NEW ARTIST

The Recording Academy long had a rule that an artist could be entered no more than three times in this category, which would have knocked out Ella Langley, Megan Moroney, Ken Carson, Ravyn Lenae and Geese. But in June, the academy announced that it is upping the cap to four. That more lenient policy will make it difficult for the academy to turn away anyone, but FLO was nominated for an album earlier this year, which makes the act ineligible. And Don Toliver has had five consecutive top 10 albums on the Billboard 200 dating back to March 2020. It will be up to a screening committee to determine if that runs afoul of the first guideline under Not Eligible: "Any artist who had achieved a breakthrough in a prior eligibility period."

Clockwise from left: Kay, Moroney, Fike, Role Model, Todd and Geese.

DOMINIC FIKE

The singer-songwriter, 30, landed his first two top 40 hits on the Hot 100 this year: "White Keys" and "Babydoll." He recorded the latter track in 2018, which means it's not eligible for record of the year consideration, but that shouldn't make him ineligible here. Fike was nominated for album of the year in 2022 as a featured artist on the deluxe edition of Justin Bieber's *Justice*, but since he was featured on less than 20% of the album's playing time, that shouldn't knock him out here, either.

GEESE

The four-member rock band fronted by 24-year-old Cameron Winter formed in Brooklyn in 2016. The group's fourth studio album, *Getting Killed*, became its first to make the Billboard 200. The band has become a major player on the festival circuit, playing Coachella, Bonnaroo, Lollapalooza, Governors Ball and Outside Lands. The act also made its first appearances on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *Saturday Night Live*.

BELLA KAY

Kay, 20, cracked the top 20 on the Hot 100 with "iloveitiloveitiloveit." Kay has been chosen as an opening act on upcoming tours by Noah Kahan and Gracie Abrams, both of whom are past best new artist nominees. Her debut album, *My Reckless Abandon*, arrived July 12.

ELLA LANGLEY

Langley, 27, won new female artist of the year at the Academy of Country Music Awards in May 2025 and was nominated for new artist of the year at the Country Music Association Awards in November 2025 and new artist of the year at the 2026 American Music Awards. *Dandelion*, her second studio album, spent two weeks atop the Billboard 200 and has so far logged 13 weeks at No. 1 on Top Country Albums.

MEGAN MORONEY

Moroney, 28, won new female artist of the year at the ACM Awards in May 2024 and new artist of the year at the CMA Awards that November. *Cloud 9*, her third studio album, reached No. 1 on both the Billboard 200 and Top Country Albums.

ROLE MODEL

Role Model's 2025 breakout hit, "Sally, When the Wine Runs Out," spilled into this eligibility year. The artist born Tucker Pillsbury, 29, performed the song on *Saturday Night Live* as musical guest in October 2025, joined by a surprise appearance from Charli xcx. Improbably, he's competing for a best new artist nod with another Tucker, country star Tucker Wetmore.

SIENNA SPIRO

In addition to her breakthrough hit, "Die on This Hill," Spiro gained added exposure when her song "Material Lover" was featured in *The Devil Wears Prada 2*. Spiro, who turns 21 in September, is vying to become the second English woman artist in a row to win in this category following Olivia Dean.

MALCOLM TODD

Todd's second studio album, *Do That Again*, entered the Billboard 200 at No. 5 in June. "Earrings," from his 2024 mixtape, *Sweet Boy*, has climbed as high as No. 22 on the Hot 100. Todd comes from a musical family. His sister Audrey Hobert co-wrote Gracie Abrams' smash "That's So True" and has also released an album of her own. Todd turns 23 in September.

WITHIN REACH

Ken Carson; Miles Caton; Dijon; Stella Lefty; Ravyn Lenae; Mariah the Scientist; Slayyyter; The Red Clay Strays; Trueno; Tucker Wetmore

MORONEY: AMBER KASLY. ROLE MODEL: CHLOE CHIPPS/NOAH; GEESE: MARK SOMMERFELD. KAY: MIKAH REESE. TODD: ADAN CULLEN. FIKE: CLAYBORNE BILORAN.

LATIN GRAMMYS ALBUM OF THE YEAR

Over the last few years, Latin artists have become increasingly open to experimenting with rhythms and sounds beyond their own realms — whether regional Mexican, Latin pop, *urbano*, rock or tropical. The last year has been especially remarkable, with acts like Carín León, CA7RIEL & Paco Amoroso and Rosalía passionately embracing artistic freedom and expanding the notion of what Latin music can sound like. On Sept. 16, when 10 Latin Grammy album of the year nominees will be announced, these five boundary-pushing projects are most likely to make the list.

BY SIGAL RATNER-ARIAS

CA7RIEL & PACO AMOROSO

Free Spirits

Less than a year after receiving their first Latin Grammy nominations — 10 total — and winning five for *Papota*, CA7RIEL & Paco Amoroso could once again vie for the top prize that eluded them in 2025, this time with *Free Spirits.* On this acclaimed 12-track set — which ranked at No. 2 on *Billboard*'s midyear list "Best Latin Albums of 2026 (So Far)" and reached No. 11 on Top Latin Pop Albums — the breakout Argentine duo reflects on the highs and lows of its meteoric rise and newfound fame with vulnerability, while maintaining its signature irreverence. Taking the genre-blending style that made the act an international sensation even further, the pair experiments with Middle Eastern rhythms, dance-pop, rock, bossa nova, bachata and more, inviting stars such as Sting, Anderson .Paak, Jack Black and Fred again.. to the party.

FONSECA

Antes Que El Tiempo Se Vaya

On his 11th studio album, Fonseca sings about life, love, identity and gratitude from a more mature perspective, taking the passage of time and an appreciation of the present as his starting point. Across 12 tracks, the nine-time Latin Grammy winner presents a remarkable set that is intimate and deeply connected to his tropical roots, while also venturing into genres such as merengue, salsa and *cumbia* alongside acts like Rawayana, Rubén Blades and Juanes (the lattermost on the catchy title track). Previously nominated for album of the year with *Fonseca Sinfónico* (2014), *Conexión* (2016), *Agustín* (2019) and *Viajante* (2022), the Colombian singer-songwriter — the veteran artist on this list — has yet to win this category. *Antes Que El Tiempo se Vaya* reached No. 23 on Top Tropical Albums and ranked at No. 5 on *Billboard*'s "Best Latin Albums of 2026 (So Far)" list.

CARÍN LEÓN

MUDA

The four-time Latin Grammy winner's last two releases — *Boca Chueca, Vol. 1* (2024) and *Palabra de To's (Seca)* (2025) — have been nominated for album of the year. In his third consecutive year vying for the prize, *MUDA* could be a strong contender. Ranked at No. 3 on *Billboard*'s "Best Latin Albums of 2026 (So Far)" list, the 14-track set continues demonstrating his much-praised versatility, with the regional Mexican star exploring ska, soul, salsa, disco and even *carranga* (a popular Colombian genre) without turning his back on his original sound. The set also includes two collaborations with acts León has said to be a fan of: Colombian rocker Juanes and Venezuelan trippy-pop band Rawayana.

Clockwise from top left: León, Montenegro, Rosalía, Fonseca and CA7RIEL & Paco Amoroso.

RAWAYANA

¿Dónde Es El After?

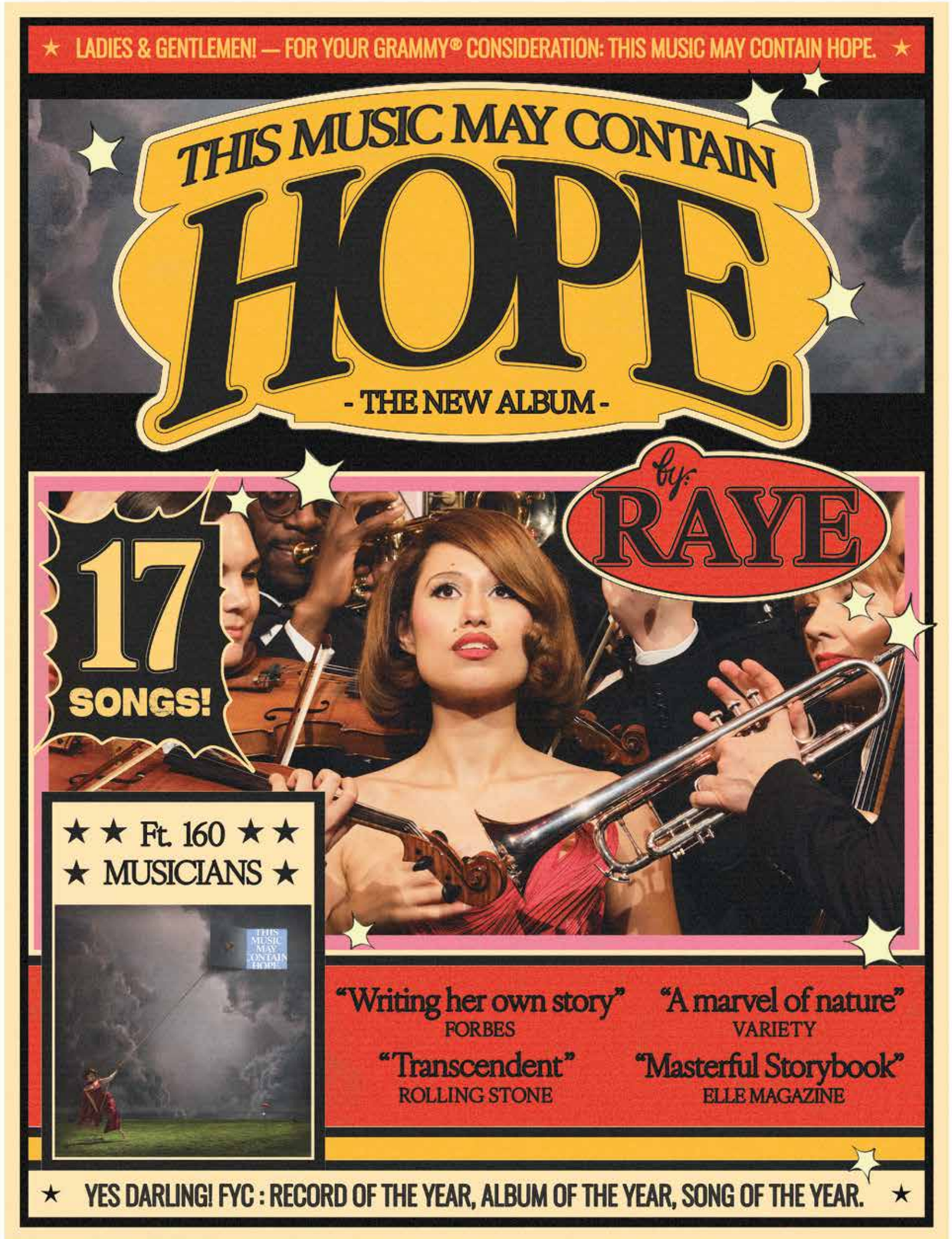
After being nominated for best new artist in 2017 and winning its first Latin Grammy last year for best Latin electronic music performance with "Veneka," the Venezuelan band seems ready to jump into the album of the year category with its latest production: the ambitious, uber-fun *¿Dónde Es El After?* (*Where Is the Afterparty?*). The 23-track album navigates from reggae to electronic to funk, pop and tropical music, resulting in the band's characteristic "trippy pop" sound while addressing both mundane and profound topics — including the political situation in the group's home country. Led by vocalist Beto Montenegro, the album wittily plays with double meanings in sultry songs like the act's first *Billboard* No. 1 single, "Inglés en Miami" — a viral track featuring singer Manuel Turizo that topped the Latin Rhythm Airplay chart in May. Ranked at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s "Best Latin Albums of 2026 (So Far)" list in June, *¿Dónde Es El After?* also includes guests Grupo Frontera, Jowell y Randy, Elena Rose and DannyLux.

ROSALÍA

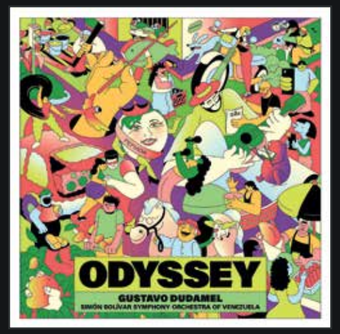
LUX

It's impossible to imagine that one of the most internationally acclaimed albums of 2025 wouldn't make the cut this year. Rosalía's *LUX* is a towering, one-of-a-kind achievement on which she sings in 13 different languages but enough Spanish to make the cut. (The Latin Grammys require at least 60% of the songs on an album contain at least 60% lyrics in Spanish, Portuguese and/or languages, dialects or idiomatic expressions recognized in Ibero-America.) *LUX* is a complex orchestral and operatic album recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra on which Rosalía not only stretches the meaning of what a pop album can be but also reaches new vocal heights. Upon its release, *LUX* made history: Rosalía became the first artist to secure No. 1 debuts across five *Billboard* charts (Top Latin Albums, Top Latin Pop Albums, Classical Albums, Classical Crossover Albums and World Albums). On the all-genre Billboard 200, it reached No. 4. The set follows her 2022 Latin Grammy-winning album of the year, *Motomami*, which makes her the only previous winner of the category here. b

LEÓN: JERY BUDAY/LABUBILLA PR AGENCY; FONSECA: MEDIOS Y MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; RAWAYANA: ALEJANDRO BETHENCOURT; ROSALÍA: GAMI TATTEPOLOGIE/GETTY IMAGES; CA7RIEL: VICTORIA DEL SEL



PARA SU CONSIDERACIÓN – LATIN GRAMMY®



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JHERAL

JUICY
LENNY TAVÁREZ

LA ESENCIA (REMIX)
GOLDEN & ZAIDER

SAOKO VOL. 1 (DELUXE)
GOLDEN

EL AMANTE
DARIEL AMANT

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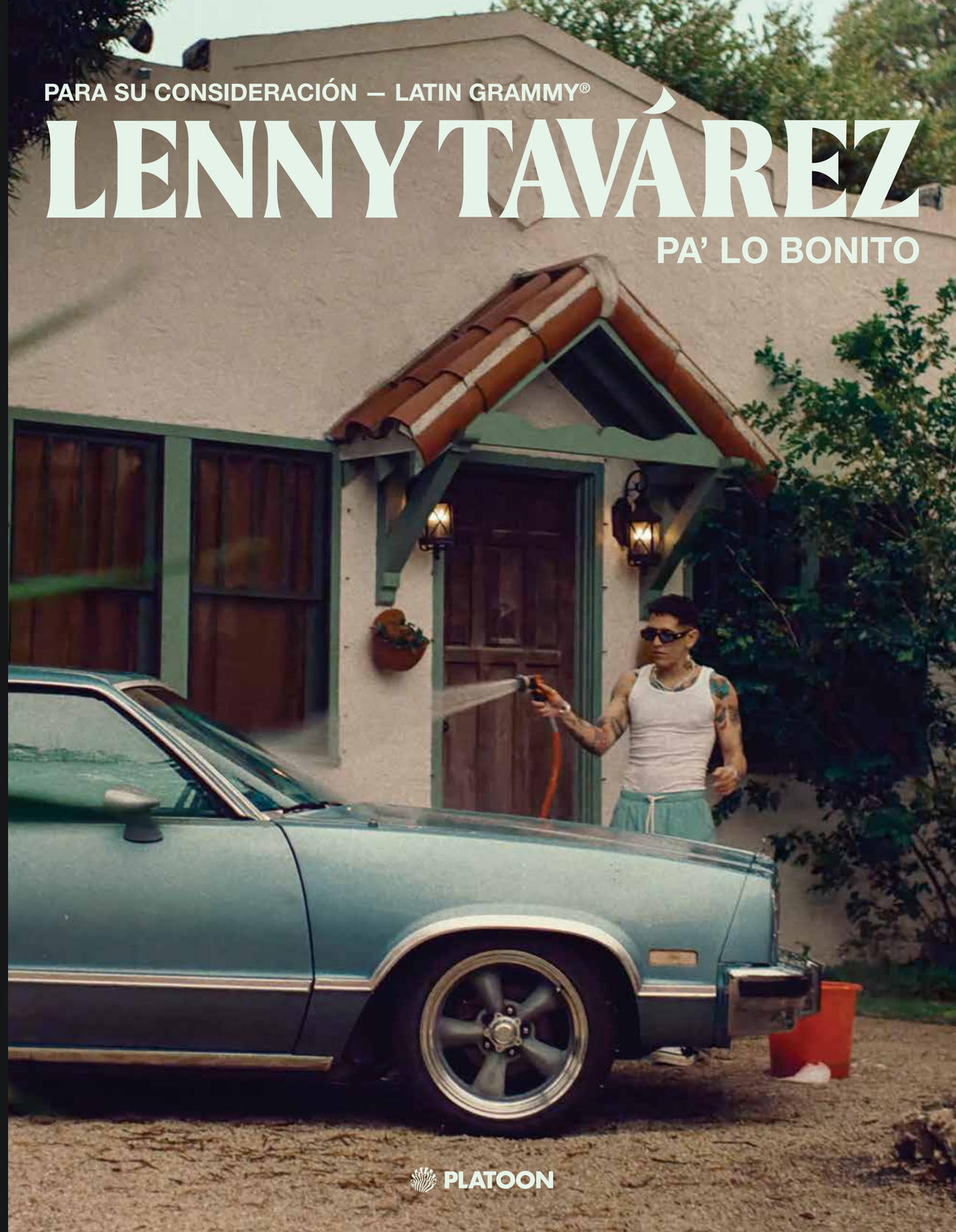

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ALMA Y FUEGO
GUSTAVO DUDAMEL, SIMÓN BOLÍVAR SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF VENEZUELA

FROM ORDINARY THINGS
SETH PARKER WOODS

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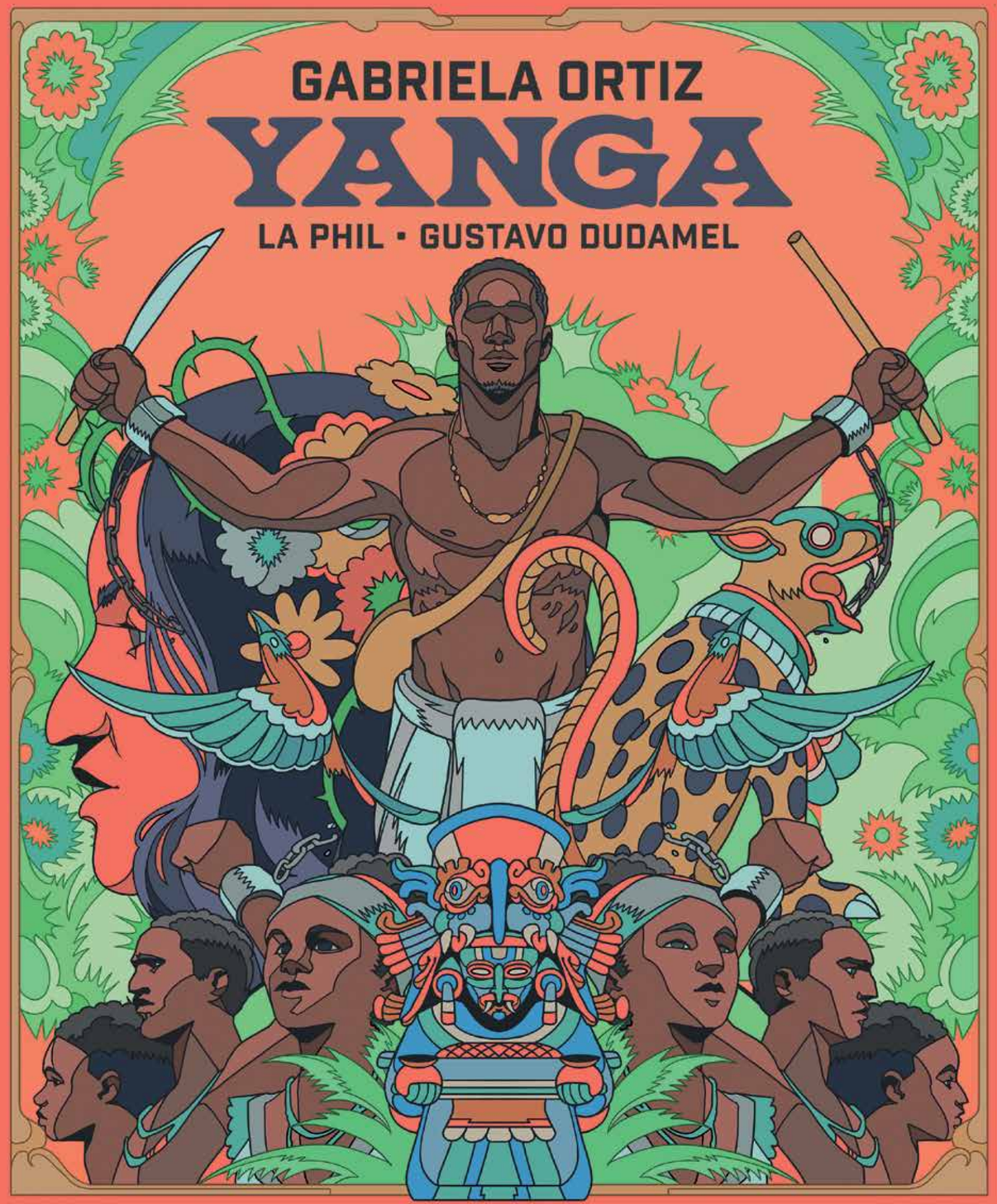

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RollingStone

*"**'OMAKASE'** is one of the best albums of 2026"*

Los Angeles Times

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KAROL G

TROPICOQUETA.

VARIETY

"WITH HER FIFTH STUDIO ALBUM "TROPICOQUETA" KAROL SET OUT TO CAPTURE THE EMOTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT SHE FELT ON STAGE"

RollingStone

"THAT PROJECT IS TROPICOQUETA, AND IT'S ONE SHE MADE WITH A MOMENTOUS GOAL IN MIND: TO HARNESS THE CLASSIC SOUNDS OF HER CULTURE AND TRANSLATE THEM INTO SONGS THAT BEAT WITH A HEART THAT IS ALL HER OWN"

GRAMMY.COM

"WHILE KAROL WAS UNDENIABLY A SUPERSTAR LONG BEFORE TROPICOQEUTA, THIS ALBUM IS AN INFICATION THAT SHE'S READY FOR A FULL GLOBAL TAKEOVER"

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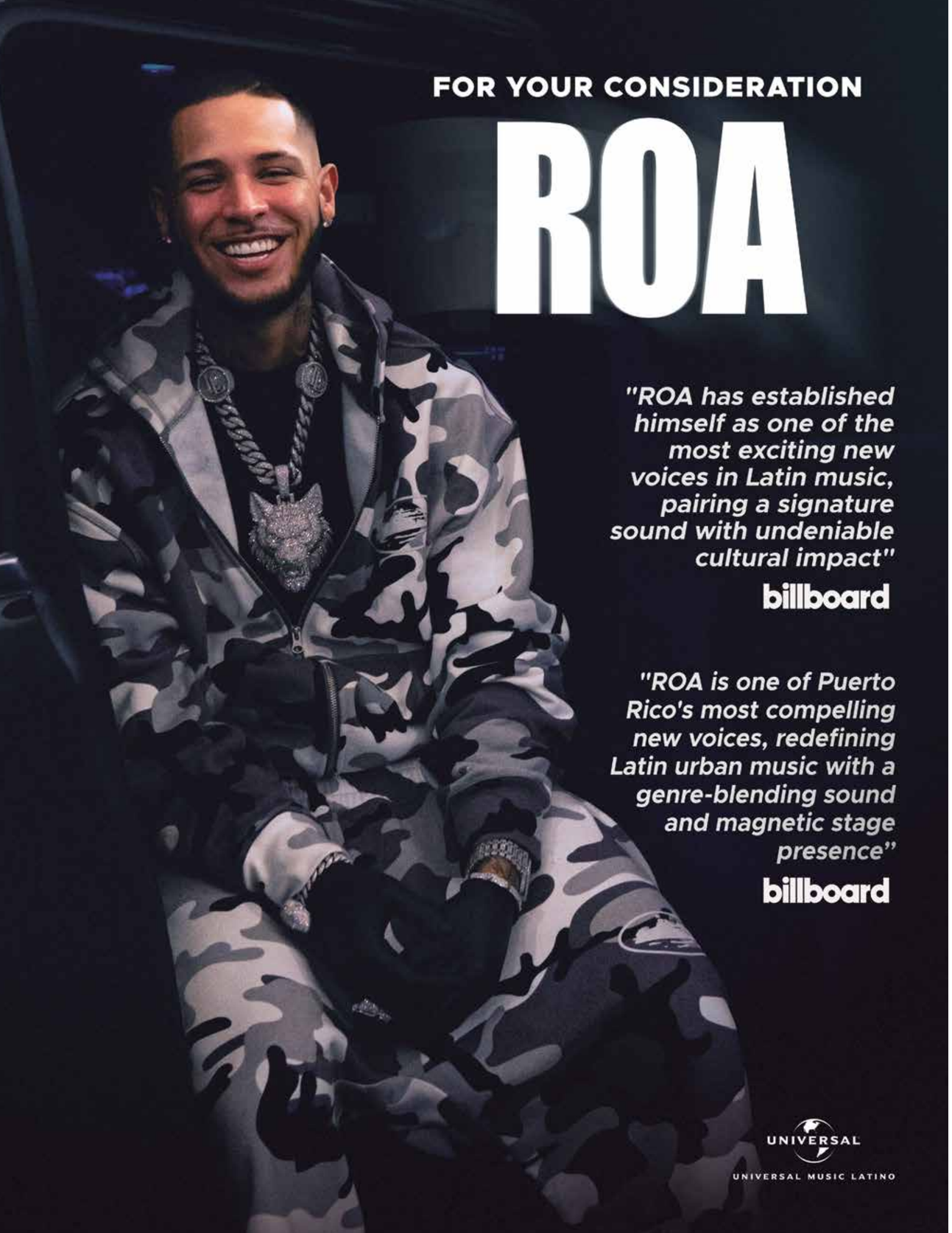
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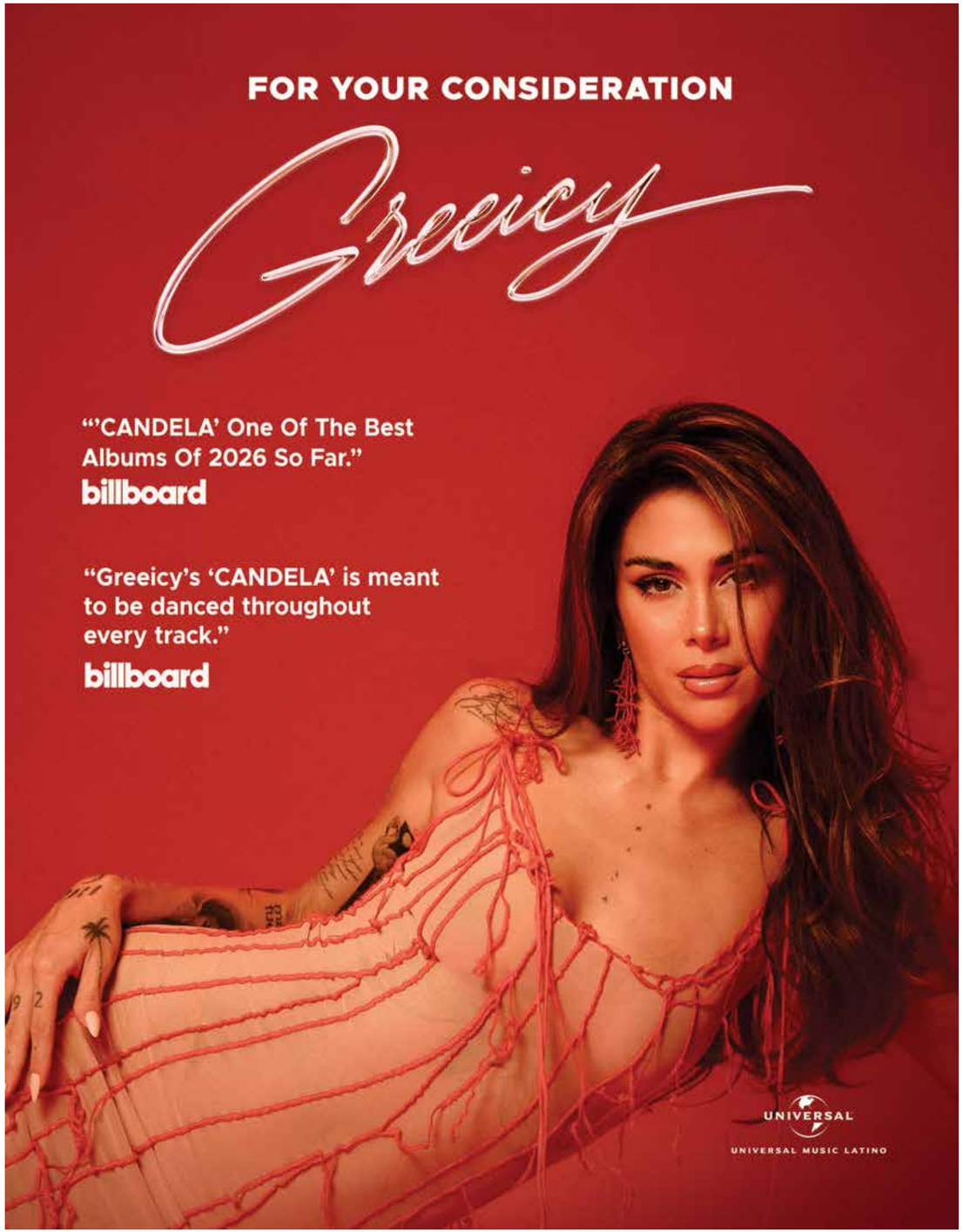
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Greeicy
"'CANDELA' One Of The Best Albums Of 2026 So Far."
billboard
"Greeicy's 'CANDELA' is meant to be danced throughout every track."
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RITA WILSON
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• PEOPLE •

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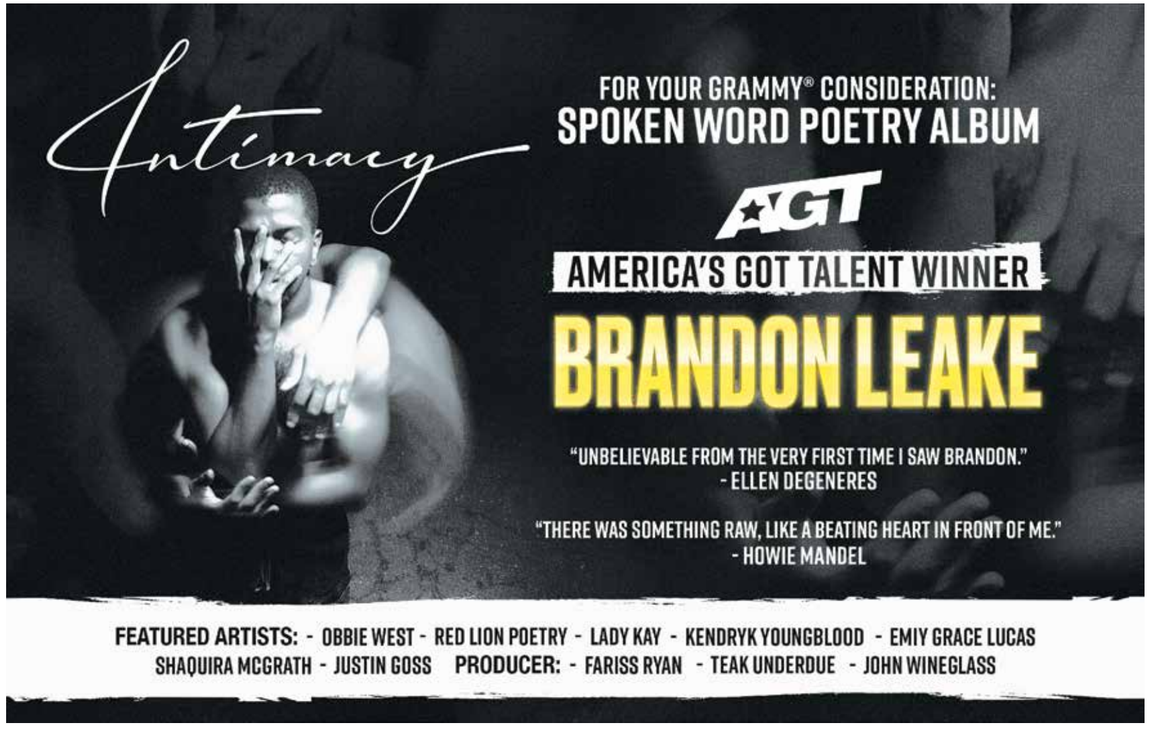
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the true meaning of the
Blues and inspired me to
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I will always be grateful
that he believed in me."
Billy Branch
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BILLY BRANCH and the SONS OF BLUES
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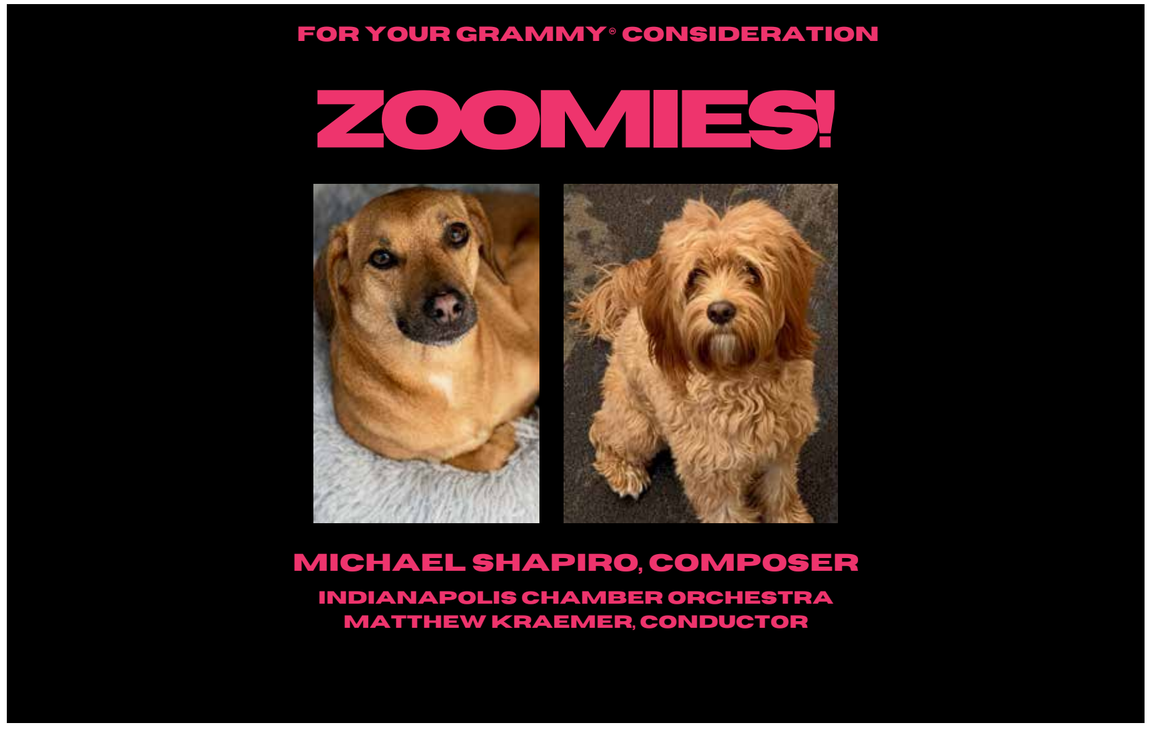
Inductee into the Blues Foundation's
–Blues Hall of Fame Museum in Memphis
ROSA'S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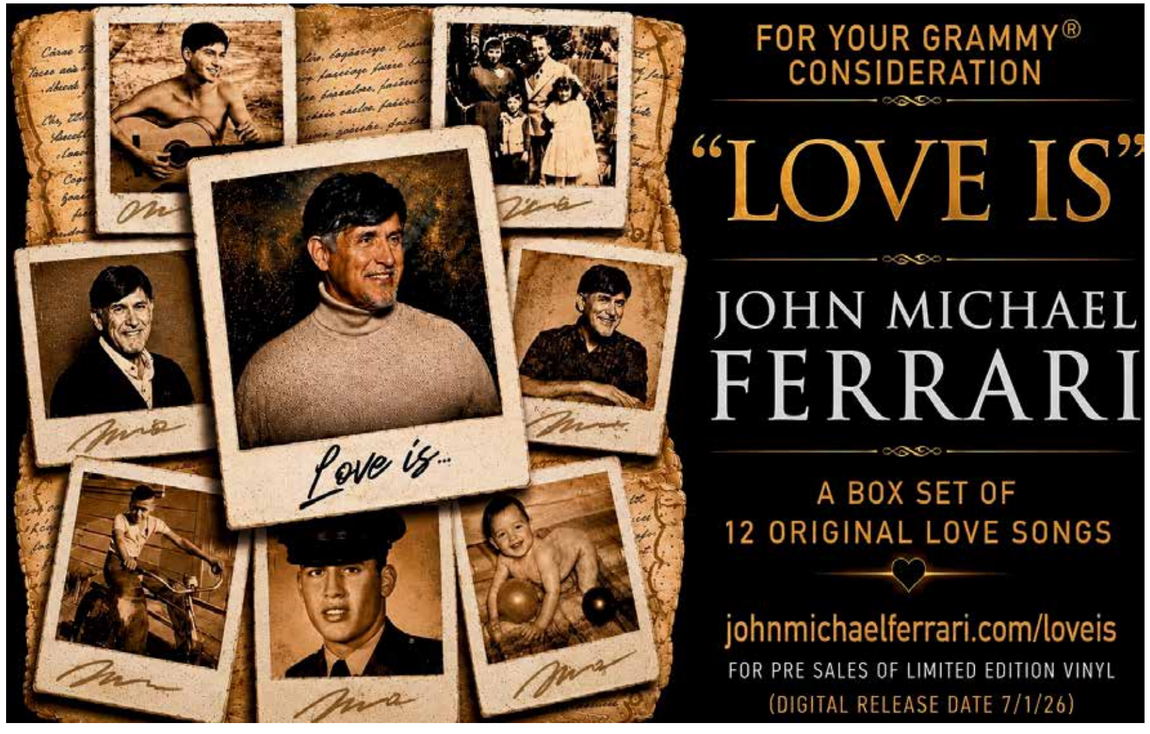
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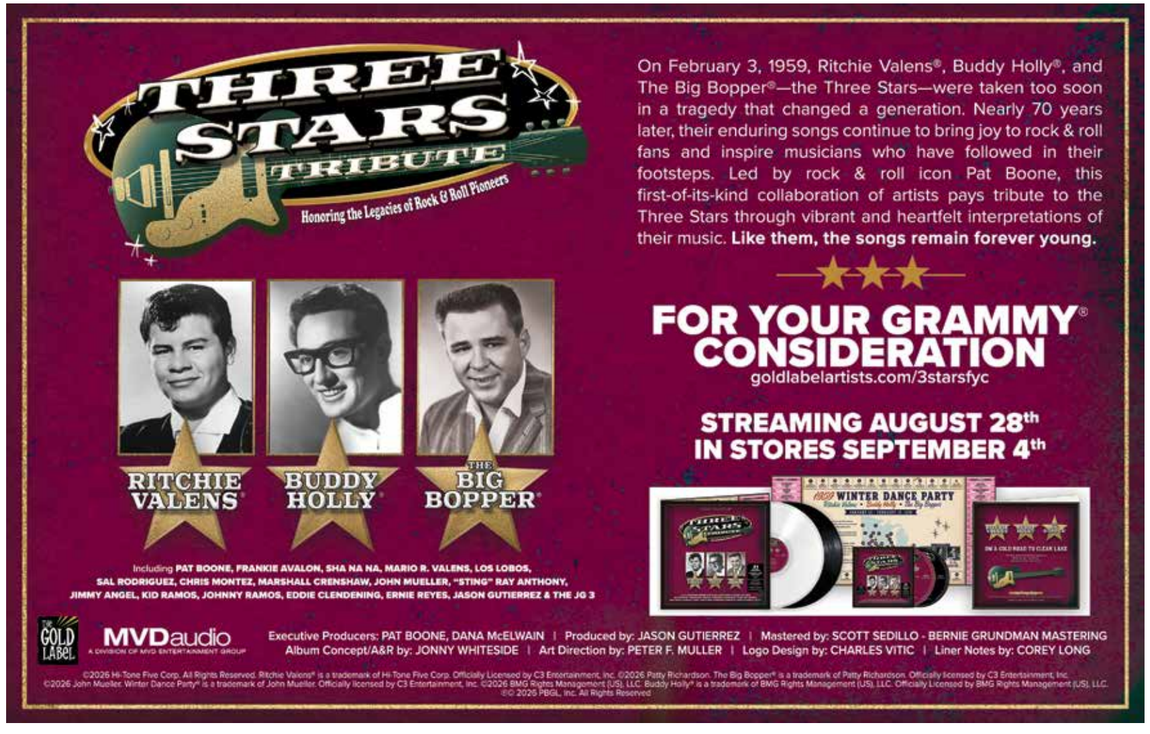
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THE GOLD LABEL
MVDaudio
Executive Producers: PAT BOONE, DANA McELWAIN | Produced by: JASON GUTIERREZ | Mastered by: SCOTT SEDILLO - BERNIE GRUNDMAN MASTERING
Album Concept/A&R by: JONNY WHITESIDE | Art Direction by: PETER F. MULLER | Logo Design by: CHARLES VITIC | Liner Notes by: COREY LONG

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LYRICS BY ELISA BARTOLI AND STEVEN VITALI
PRODUCED AND ARRANGED BY STEVEN VITALI
ELISA BARTOLI
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STEVEN VITALI
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ELISA BARTOLI AND STEVEN VITALI
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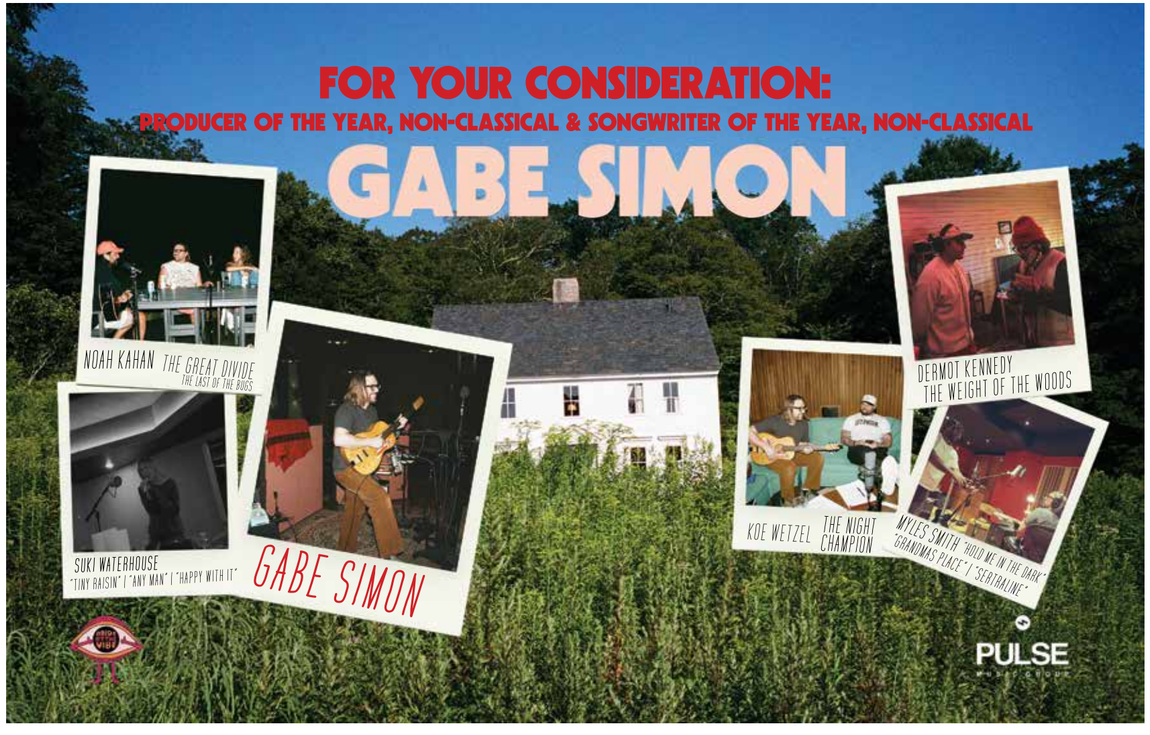
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THE LAST OF THE BUGS
SUKI WATERHOUSE
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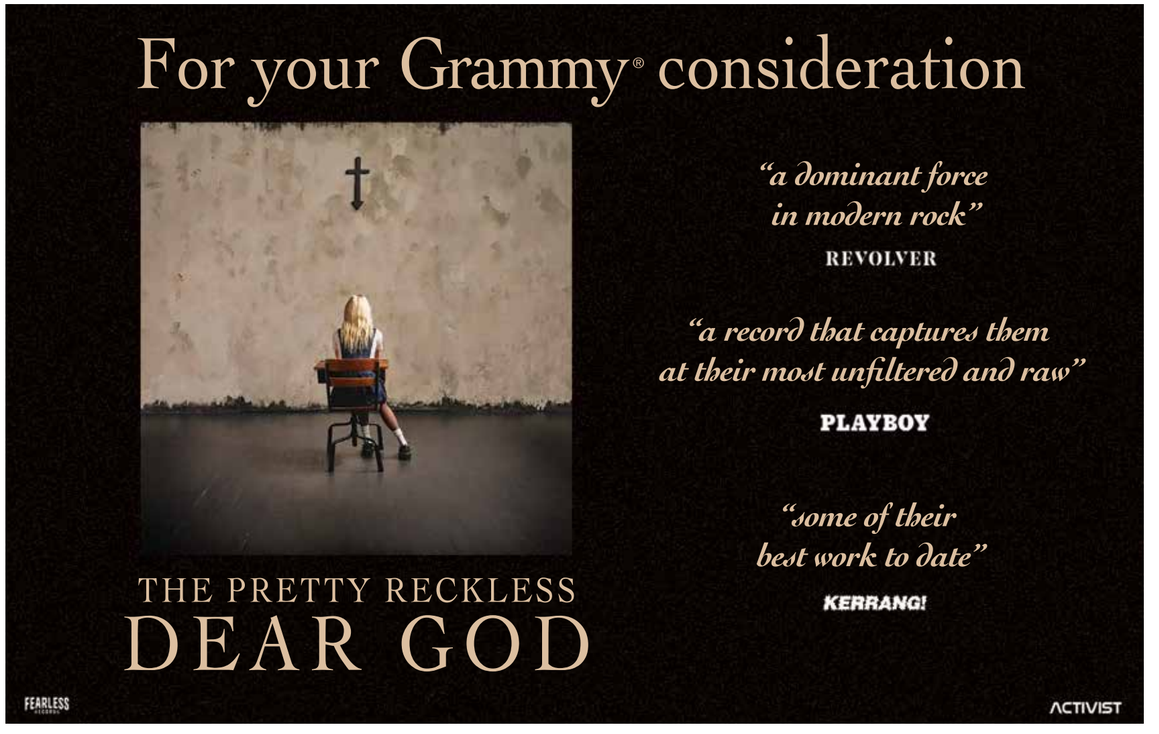
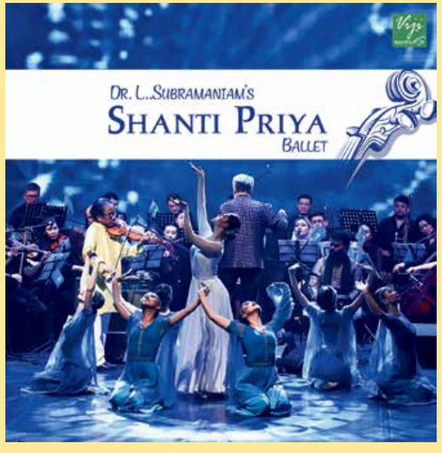
GABE SIMON
KOE WETZEL THE NIGHT CHAMPION
DERMOT KENNEDY THE WEIGHT OF THE WOODS
MYLES SMITH "HOLD ME IN THE DARK" GRANDMAS PLACE | "SERIALINE"
PULSE





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(feat. César "Vampiro" López, Pliego Villarreal & Mauricio Claveria)

JAU

CESAR VAMPIRO LOPEZ
PLIEGO VILLARREAL
MAURICIO CLAVERIA
WERE HERE

-ARTIST: J.A.U
-MUSIC AND LYRICS: ANTHONY JAU RODRIGUEZ
-MIX ENGINEER: RAFA SARDINA

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feat. Max Atom

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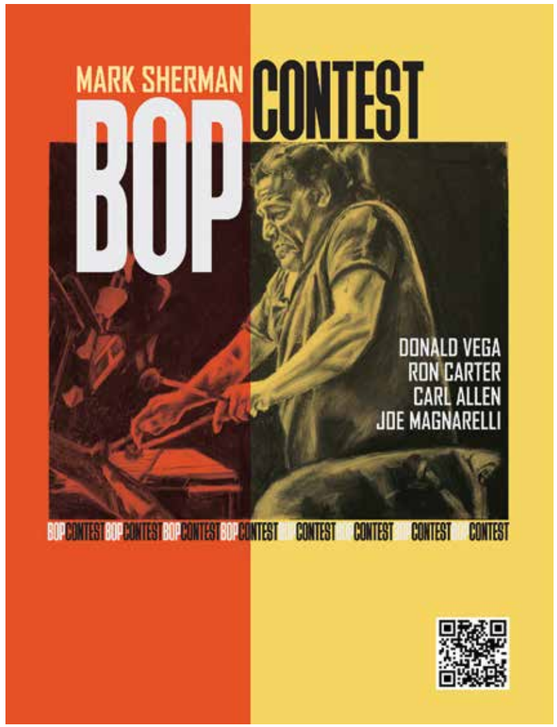

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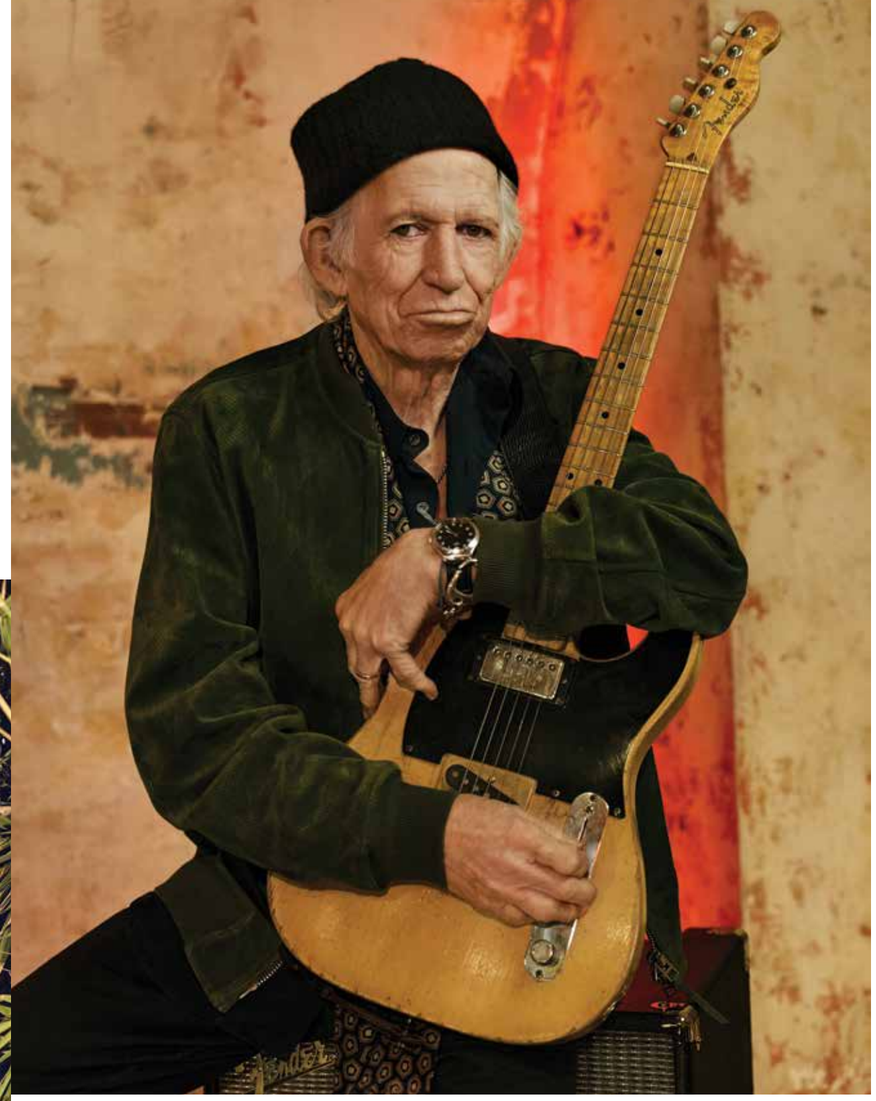
Time Is On

At 82, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards are as vital and creative as ever. With a new Rolling Stones album just out, the yin and yang of rock open up about touring, AI and why their partnership still works

Photographed by Joe Pugliese

Jagger photographed June 30 in London.



Photographed by Kevin Mazur

Richards photographed July 2 at The Django in New York.

Their Side

By Joe Lynch

Und er

a poolside garden canopy in West London, Mick Jagger offers me a tongue-in-cheek choice as we sit down: "Should I be polite and English or shall I be rude and New York-like?"

The English rocker, who lived in New York for 18 years and was knighted in 2003, is smirking — but one gets the impression he could readily slide into either mode. The Rolling Stones frontman can code switch in a Jumpin' Jack flash, talking as comfortably about physics and aviation as pop stars and bluesmen.

Forty-eight hours later, when I sit down with Keith Richards in a Manhattan jazz club for a separate chat, he offers no such options: Keef is simply Keef. If the 82-year-old Jagger is polished and detail-oriented (he gives feedback on the placement of our chairs relative to the camera filming our conversation, and notes that an overhead airplane must be "old-fashioned" because he can hear its propeller), Richards, also 82, is relaxed and slyly mischievous, full of rumbling chuckles and one-liners about everything from smartphones ("I feel Toytown eludes me") to his grandchildren ("there's these little creatures rolling around that sort of vaguely remind you of somebody").

They may share an obsession with American blues and R&B, but the Glimmer Twins are far from identical. And since their debut recording 63 years ago, that oil-and-water alchemy has fueled the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world. While the Stones started out as a rhythm and blues covers band steered by guitarist Brian Jones, the songwriting tandem of singer Jagger and guitarist Richards (which began when then-manager Andrew Loog Oldham demanded they write their own material to keep pace with The Beatles) soon became the Stones' not-so-secret weapon. As Chuck Berry acolytes, Jagger and Richards mastered the art of biting rock brevity, releasing a string of genre-hopping singles (five of their eight Billboard Hot 100 chart-toppers came between 1965 and 1969) that made them stars on both sides of the Atlantic and inspired a generation of rockers (garage, punk, country and beyond) from Croydon to California.

But success came with casualties. In July 1969, Jones was found dead in his swimming pool at 27, weeks after a meeting with Jagger, Richards and drummer Charlie Watts about his drug abuse led to him leaving the group. Months after, a woman was fatally stabbed during the band's concert at Altamont Free Festival — later cited as the moment when the optimism of the '60s came crashing down. Tumult continued in the '70s. Mick Taylor, Jones' replacement, was in turn supplanted in 1975 by Ronnie Wood (who has remained a member since). The group weathered drug-related arrests, went into tax exile from the United Kingdom and filed suit against former manager Allen Klein for allegedly fraudulent practices. (The band settled with Klein in 1984.)

Those legal headaches didn't quash creativity or commercial success. If anything, the "me" decade is when the Stones codified their distinctive style — sleazy, bluesy and boozy rock, presided over by Jagger's insouciant sneer and Richards' roguish grin — on landmark albums including *Sticky Fingers* (1971), *Exile on Main St.* (1972) and *Some Girls* (1978). On the business side, the launch of the now-defunct Rolling Stones Records label in 1970 produced the iconic lips'n'tongue logo and signaled the band's efforts to take control of its recordings, finances and future.

In 1986, a full nine years before winning a competitive Grammy, the Stones received a lifetime achievement award from the Recording Academy. But the elder statesmen of rough-and-tumble rock weren't done blazing trails. Sniffing out opportunity, the Stones partnered up with fragrance maker Jovan on their 1981 tour, receiving several million dollars to offset production costs. The 1989-90 *Steel Wheels* tour, promoted by the legendary Michael Cohl, changed how tours were staged and financed, upping the ante on immersive stage designs and establishing new norms for the touring biz (corporate sponsors, merchandise aplenty) that continue to this day. From then on, the Stones remained a road juggernaut, grossing $2.9 billion and selling 28.9 million tickets dating back to *Steel Wheels*, according to Billboard Boxscore. The band's 2024 trek alone earned $235 million and sold 848,000 tickets across 18 shows, marking the band's fifth consecutive tour to average at least 45,000 tickets per night. The days of manager drama are behind them, too: Joyce Smyth, who entered the group's orbit as part of its legal team, has been the band's manager since 2010. (Jane Rose manages Richards, and Pia Squillino serves as Jagger's business executive.)

But despite their plentiful live shows, there's been a comparative dearth of new Stones songs in the 21st century: 2023's *Hackney Diamonds* was the first Stones album of original material since 2005's *A Bigger Bang*. Although the band had been knocking around material for years, it needed a push over the finish line. About a year after Watts died in 2021 at age 80, Paul McCartney suggested while dining with Wood that the band give producer Andrew Watt (now a bit of a studio specialist with veteran rock acts from Ozzy Osbourne to Pearl Jam) a shot. The next day, Wood spoke to Jagger and learned Watt's name was at the top of a list of producers the frontman was considering. "So we tried this young whippersnapper," Wood, speaking over the phone from London, recounts the week after I meet Jagger and Richards. According to the guitarist, who joined the band 51 years ago but remains its "newest" member, Watt helped keep them on task: "Keith would say, 'I'll do my guitar next week.' 'No, you'll do it now.' " The producer's deft musicianship ensured the Stones took him seriously. "He's a great guitarist. He can play my parts better than I can," Wood jokes.

Hackney Diamonds debuted at No. 3 on the Billboard 200, becoming their 38th top 10 set, and it later won the Grammy Award for best rock album. And this time, they didn't wait 18 years for a follow-up.

Drawing on unfinished material from the *Hackney Diamonds* sessions, the Stones reunited with Watt for *Foreign Tongues*, a 14-track album that dropped July 10 on Polydor/Capitol, their label home since the 2016 covers album *Blue & Lonesome*. Boasting low-key guest spots from McCartney, The Cure's Robert Smith, Red Hot Chili Peppers' Chad Smith and Bruno Mars, *Foreign Tongues* pairs pointed, often political lyrics with ass-shaking rock ("Mr. Charm," "Divine Intervention"), Chicago blues ("Rough and Twisted") and country pastiche ("Ringing Hollow").

"Mick is very focused on the grooves, the BPM, the chord movement, the accents," says Watt, 35. "Keith is able to weave poetry out of that — taking something Mick started and making a riff everyone's going to hang onto, a melodic phrase so catchy it becomes the hook of the song." It adds up to a robust, potent album that punches harder than its predecessor and slaps down the idea that aging artists need to be nostalgic.

> "Every time we got a guest to come and listen, to hear the album … we put them to work. 'You like the song? Go and play something.' "
> —Jagger

JAGGER GROOMING BY CAROLINE ELLMES

Even on different sides of the Atlantic, the duo's yin-yang chemistry is palpable. Fielding similar questions, Jagger and Richards start from disparate places but frequently arrive at simpatico conclusions; they are sublimely mismatched.

"They're absolutely incredible together," Watt says of their in-studio chemistry. "There's no Mick song that's not better with Keith in it, and there's no Keith song that's not better with Mick in it. They complete each other. It's unbelievable to watch and to learn from. They build and they play to each other's heartbeats, and the roof leaves the building."

How much of *Foreign Tongues* grew out of the *Hackney Diamonds* sessions?

Mick Jagger We had, from *Hackney Diamonds*, three songs we didn't put on purposely, because we knew we wanted to save them. We always planned that we were going to do [another] album pretty quick.

Keith Richards I feel like *Foreign Tongues* is a continuation of *Hackney Diamonds* — not so much songs as the energy and the feel of it. As happens with Mick and me occasionally, we don't see each other for a while. Then somehow when we get together and say, "Well, what have you got?" — "Oh, that bit fits with this." In a way, we're writing the same song without knowing it on the other side of the globe.

Jagger Keith did a really nice riff on ["Mr. Charm"] that was better than the one I'd originally written, which is his job: to do my riff, only better.

How does Ronnie fit into it?

Richards Ronnie listens with an eagle ear, and then suddenly comes up with, "What if I do this?" Perfect. I call it the ancient form of weaving — that's what we do. That's also, to me, the other fun part of it — I don't know what Ronnie is going to come up with. You're watching this thing grow in front of your ears.

There's a bite to a lot of these songs — where does that come from?

Richards That's a tough one to answer. At different times in my career I could give you very different answers. Energy — I don't know whether it's a matter of enthusiasm, and you go through waves of this. I think a lot of it also had to do with the fact that we really wanted to get this rhythm section of Steve [Jordan, who subbed for Watts on the band's 2021 tour and currently serves as its drummer] and Darryl [Jones, the bassist who began working with the band in 1993] recorded as the Stones. Because it's a hell of a thing to lose Charlie Watts. Thank God that Charlie and Steve were like that (*Crosses fingers.*) so it was never any real hassle. Charlie Watts said, "If I'm not there, put Steve in." So we were sort of under orders. It was important just to get this version of the Stones down on record.

Jagger We had a good track with Charlie ["Hit Me in the Head"] and we've got other tracks with Charlie. I keep reading this is Charlie's final appearance — well, we've got other tracks with Charlie.

What is Watt's role in the studio?

Richards He'll say, "Let's try this one, let's throw a piano on here, see what happens." Basically, he becomes part of the band. A good producer is usually pretty much the other, unseen member of the band.

Jagger Andy and I work together well, because we balance each other out.

As on *Hackney Diamonds*, Paul McCartney pops in for a guest spot, playing bass on "Covered in You." He and John Lennon co-wrote the Stones' second single, "I Wanna Be Your Man." Now, six decades later, he's in the studio with you.

Richards The Beatles and the Stones. Paul sounds like he's always missed not being in a band, I think, ever since The Beatles broke up. He just loves that camaraderie, that way of doing things. And he's great fun to play with. We do go back a long way.

Jagger Paul was next door making the album he currently has [this year's *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*], which is a very good album. It's great. We called Paul in to do two numbers one day because we didn't have a bass player, per se. For Paul, he has to write the bass line, but this is a very different song to the one he did on *Hackney Diamonds*, perhaps a bit more difficult. Paul really liked the song, anyway.

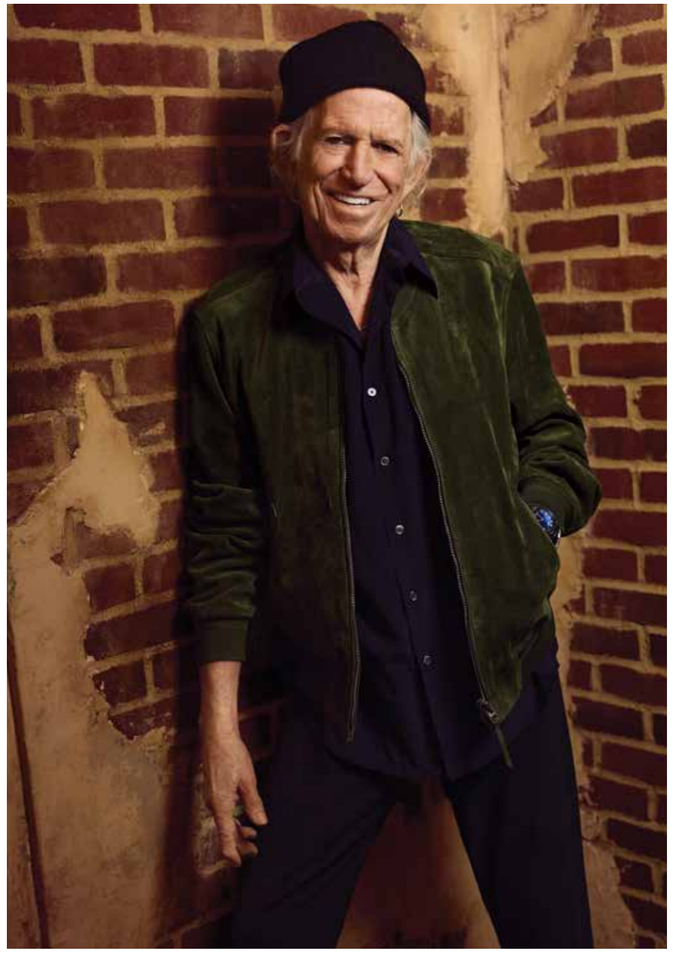
There are a lot of guests on the album.

Jagger A lot of them don't do much.

It's not a big star cameo situation; it's them coming into your world. Bruno Mars, for instance: How did he end up playing cowbell on "Never Wanna Lose You"?

Jagger Every time we got a guest to come and listen, to hear the album — because we were probably in the premixing stage by then — we put them to work. "You like the song? Go and play something." That's what we did with Bruno. "I really love this groove!" "You play percussion, what do you want to play? Go out and do it."

Robert Smith guests on two tracks. He's also on Olivia Rodrigo's album this year. What are your thoughts on her rock music?



RICHARDS GROOMING BY TINA HEART MONTALBANO

Jagger She's really good at it. Everyone thought she was a different kind of singer, but there's quite a few female singers that have made that transition. It's not a permanent transition necessarily, but the ability to change styles from what you think their original girly pop stuff is — it's kind of interesting.

What are your songwriting habits like? Do you keep notebooks, record bits on your phone?

Jagger The good thing about writing in a notebook is you have time to think and cross out — you've got your crossings-out and corrections. But the advantage of spitting into your phone or your iPad is that you don't have any censorship between your head and the pen. You're never censoring it because it's too quick. It's just coming out real spitball fast.

Richards There are a lot of notebooks with little cryptic phrases written down that you're supposed to remember what the hell they meant. And then when you don't, you go through them and make up a whole new meaning. But yeah, there's a lot of jotting things down. Songwriting is really observing. It could be just a phrase that somebody mentions across a bar and something clicks — and it's just a matter of realizing that something's there.

Keith, your lead vocal on the album, "Some of Us," is about an amazing woman who has everyone on their knees. Where does a song like that come from — personal experience?

Richards A little bit of that. The fact is the song has been around — there are several other versions that must be at least 20 years old in the making. Where they come from, I don't know. Whoever she is, she's lost in the mists of time. (*Laughs.*)

Is it important to have a Keith lead vocal on each Stones album?

Richards No, it's not a fetish. It's just usually I've got one or two, and Mick'll say, "I can't get around that one, you better sing that." And other times I say, "This one I'm keeping, I'm going to do this one." It just depends on the song and whether we need another song or not. It's not a forced thing — "Where's my song?" But there's always one or two that crop up, and Mick says, "This one's yours."

The album ends with a Chuck Berry cover, "Beautiful Delilah." The Stones' first single was a Chuck Berry cover, too, of "Come On." I'm guessing if there were a Mount Rushmore of The Rolling Stones' influences, he would be on it. Who else?

Jagger He definitely would be up there. That's a good one. I suppose Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis maybe, Little Richard.

Richards Oh, it would have to be Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, through the harp of Little Walter Jacobs. And then you go through the old litany of the '50s and '60s and the Chicago blues roster — John Lee Hooker. An amazing period in time, the '50s, for the ways of recording.

Jagger We haven't used tape for ages, but Andy [Watt] wanted to use tape for "Beautiful Delilah." I said, "What does it matter? If someone listens to it on their phone, they don't know it was cut on tape — it doesn't make any difference." But we cut it on tape and we did it live. That was old style.

Your "In the Stars" video used deepfake technology to show what looks like the Stones of yesteryear performing your 2026 single. What was that like to see?

Jagger We had a lot of fun with that. It's only the faces of the musicians that are different. They're not fake people in a fake room; they're all in a room, really playing together. The musicians are real musicians that look a bit like The Rolling Stones in 1968. The only thing was the faces. So they worked on mine first, and it kind of looked like me, but not really — like one of my children when they were 23 or something. And then I saw Ronnie, and I said to the people working on it, "It looks more like Jeff Beck." So they had to do a bit extra work.

Richards That's our brushing with AI. I said, "Very nice. I wish I looked like that now." But maybe that's what they're good for — music videos. Put it in its proper place. It's a cartoon of me, younger. "Very nice. What's for breakfast?" Also, the idea of video and music together — I knew it was a disaster way back in the '70s. You can't shove the ears and the eyes together and say, "Here it is, look at this." But that's the commercial end of the business, and you duck and dive. The [music] video became, for a while, more important than the record — which is where it really screwed it up for me as a viable thing. It was just, "Have you seen the new video?" "No — I just made a record." But that's just me being ornery, probably.

Artificial intelligence is the new technological innovation. What do you think about AI in music?

Richards My thoughts are: I'd rather hear something original. Music could do a lot better than just trying to copy itself. After all, it's pretty simple stuff — this is not Beethoven or Bach, and I've no doubt AI can do that, but so what? We want new input. We don't want more and more copying and synthesizing. At least that's my point of view. Music is to play around with. Surely there's enough originality without having to copy nursery rhymes.

Jagger Obviously I don't want to be imitated by AI, vocally and instrumentally, and the band doesn't. I don't want people just putting stuff out there that can sound exactly like The Rolling Stones — I think that's obviously wrong. If someone wants to make music by AI, go ahead. But it has to be original — you have to have your own input and your own thoughts. There are people who use AI to just make a song from scratch, in the style of The Rolling Stones. If you were any kind of creative person, you wouldn't do that.

You guys were doing commercial synchs before most major rock bands — you had "Start Me Up" in the Windows 95 launch. At the time, people gave you some grief for that, but now it's standard practice to have a song in a commercial. Did it bother you guys back then?

Jagger No. We knew we were doing something that was going to become the norm, honestly. Like when we did sponsorship for tours, people said, "What is that?" I said, "Well, it's going to become the norm." And this is the total norm now. This is America; this is how it works.

Richards It depends. If you're going to sell out, it depends how you sell out. It can be done with a bit of tongue in cheek. Sometimes it crops up, and you say, "Yeah, that doesn't bother me, doing it that way." After all, it is a commercial world.

Do you see yourselves touring behind this album? Or perhaps doing a residency?

> "Music could do a lot better than just trying to copy itself. After all, it's pretty simple stuff — this is not Beethoven or Bach, and I've no doubt AI can do that, but so what? We want new input."
> —Richards

Jagger I don't know at the moment, honestly. I would like to tour. I like touring, like going to people. If it can only be a residency, it can only be a residency. But the thing about a residency — the only downside for people is that it's much more expensive for the further-out people that want to come and see the show.

Richards I know that this is all being kicked around. This year, we just decided, "Look, let's get the record out, and let's not rush things." So I see no reason why next year — I don't see anything this year, I can't rush it that much — but I see no reason why next year, good Lord willing, we shouldn't be able to, as you say, maybe a residency, something. Maybe you find a different way of taking the thing on the road. Bring the road to us. That's my suggestion.

"Mr. Charm" might be my favorite song on the album. There's a line in it, "the darkest days of 1916." Is that a reference to the Battle of Somme in World War I? Mick, are you a history buff?

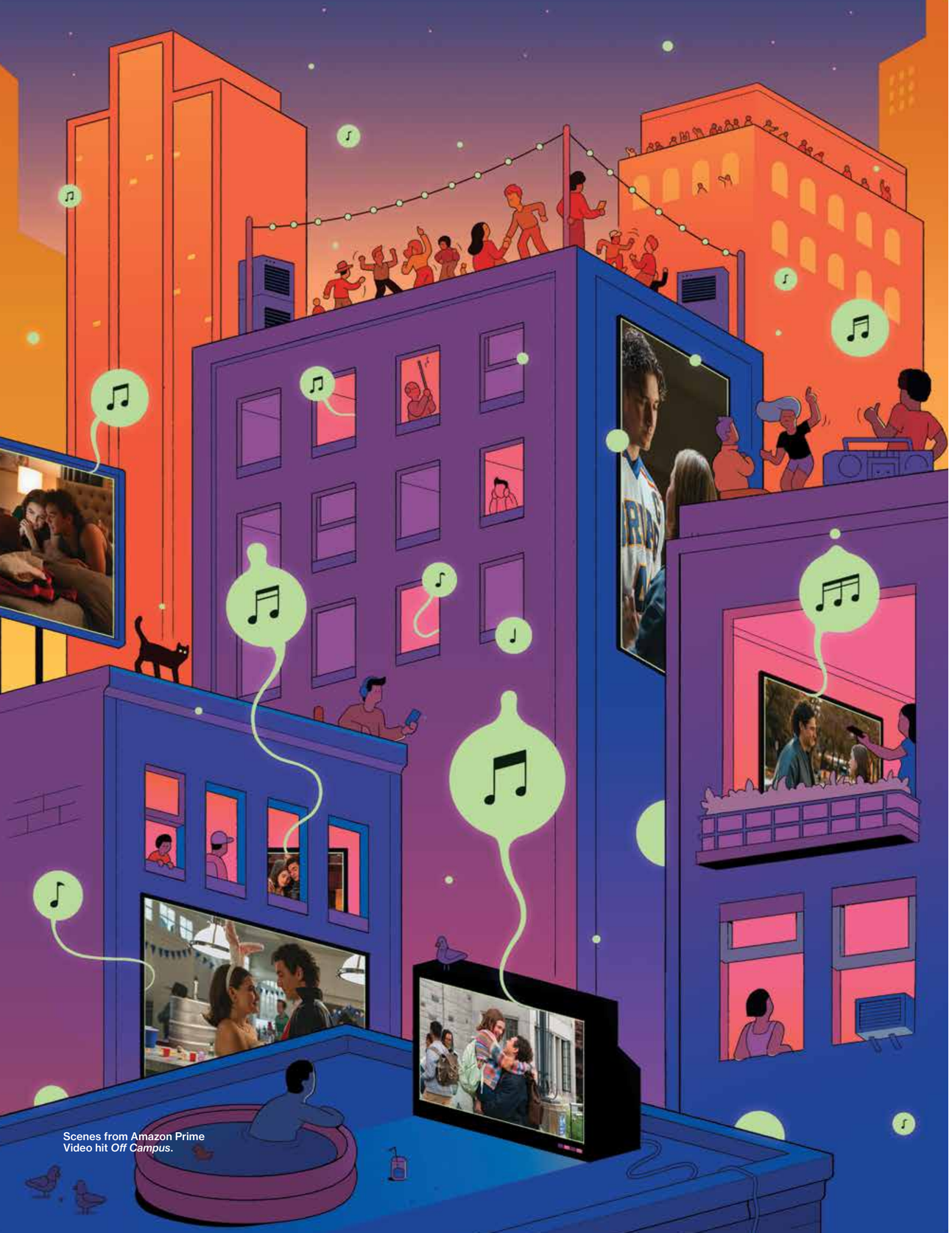
Jagger Somme or Ypres. I can't remember which. I am a history buff, but I don't know why it came to me to throw that in there as a seductive line. (*Laughs.*) I was just showing off.

What are you reading now?

Jagger It's not so much a history, it's an argument between physicists about what happened before the Big Bang. It's a layman's thing. The whole argument is, if we accept that the Big Bang happened, which not everyone does, then what did it come from? Did it come from nothing, or what happened before the Big Bang? There are lots of different scientists with different theories about what this could be. It hasn't been figured out yet, and probably never will.

If you're not touring or recording, what are you doing on a given day? You wake up, what's next?

Richards "Wake up" is important. After that, it depends on the weather. If there's no fixed plans for the day, let's see where the day takes me. I'm spoiled in that way, that I can basically turn the day on or turn the day off if I wish. Who's arrived? The grandkids. And we'll get into that area of life. You get beaten up a lot. (*Laughs.*) It's a whole new thing for me. It creeps up on you. You try and get to know them. It's a fascinating thing — enjoying it very much. b



Scenes from Amazon Prime Video hit *Off Campus*.

Everyone's In Synch (Again)

Illustration by Giacomo Gambineri

By Kristin Robinson

The new path to a viral hit? Get your song placed on a soapy TV sensation like *Off Campus* — and watch its streams skyrocket

When

Amanda Krieg Thomas was a teenager, she — like many of her peers — spent her school nights burning perfectly curated mix CDs. But rather than focusing on favorite genres, artists or specific moods, Krieg Thomas' CDs had a different theme: music from (and inspired by) her favorite TV shows. "*The OC*, *Roswell*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I loved them all," she gushes.

Teen-oriented TV was in the midst of a heyday during Krieg Thomas' young adulthood in the early aughts, as networks like The WB (which later merged with UPN to become The CW) and ABC Family (later rebranded to Freeform) zeroed in on young not-quite-adults and perfected a formula they couldn't resist — usually involving love triangles, a social outcast landing the cool kid and, as Krieg Thomas astutely noticed, music central to the storyline. Popular shows of the day like those Krieg Thomas loved, plus hits such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *One Tree Hill*, eschewed traditional scores for pop music soundtracking key moments, catapulting songs like The Fray's "How To Save a Life" and Gavin DeGraw's "I Don't Want To Be" to mass audiences in the process.

Fast forward to 2026 and a lot has changed. Krieg Thomas, 41, is now a successful music supervisor with her own company, Yay Team, where she and her colleagues find and license the perfect songs to score films and TV shows. Streaming video on demand has largely replaced cable, flooding the marketplace with shows and enabling instant, global viewership. Meanwhile, the music industry has shifted to an all-you-can-eat streaming model of its own.

But it's clear that, once again, TV aimed at adolescent and young adult audiences with an appetite for melodrama is experiencing a renaissance — and this time, it's breaking the accompanying songs to far bigger heights. Placements on recent streaming phenomena like Amazon Prime Video's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Netflix's *Wednesday* and *Stranger Things*, as well as HBO's *Euphoria*, are launching decades-old songs like Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)" and The Cramps' "Goo Goo Muck" to unforeseen chart peaks. And this year, Krieg Thomas, along with her co-music supervisor, Anna Romanoff, soundtracked one of TV's biggest new hits: Amazon Prime's *Off Campus*. The duo's onscreen song picks have been career-changing for newer acts like G Flip, The Beaches and Remi Wolf in the weeks since the show premiered in March, with its songs' official on-demand U.S. streams increasing by as much as 46,000% from the week before episodes aired to a month after, according to Luminate.

Off Campus, based on the bestselling romance book series of the same name, tells the story of Hannah (Ella Bright), a pretty-but-she-doesn't-know-it classical music major who, when she risks losing her scholarship, enters a pop songwriting contest offering the winner a free ride. Concurrently, she starts tutoring the school's hockey hot shot, Garrett (Belmont Cameli), who is at risk of getting kicked off the team if he doesn't pass his philosophy class. They make a deal: Hannah will help Garrett with his studies, and Garrett will help Hannah make her crush — a rock musician named Justin — finally notice her. Hannah and Garrett start bonding, though, and... you can probably guess what happens next.

Music is just as much of a main character in the soapy series as Hannah and Garrett. That wasn't by chance: "There's a lot of music referenced in the book," explains Romanoff, 33. "But music is not quite the same driving narrative factor as it is in the show," Krieg Thomas adds. "That was something I was immediately struck by. Yes, [Hannah's] a musician in the book, but the show centers it in a way that the book does not."

In episode two, for example, alt-pop artist Wolf performs multiple songs on the show as part of a campus concert, including a new *Off Campus*-commissioned cover of Billy Idol's "Dancing With Myself," which has since been released, earning 1.6 million official on-demand U.S. streams and counting. In the next episode, at a costume party, Hannah's best friend, Allie — dressed in Jennifer Lopez's iconic, plunging green 2000 Grammys dress — declares, "This is me!" when, lo and behold, Lopez and Pitbull's "On the Floor" comes on. In the four weeks after the episode debuted, on-demand streams for the 15-year-old song spiked by 142% in the United States.

The same episode featured another prominent instance of music becoming part of the story itself, when Hannah recommends Canadian band The Beaches — and their recent Coachella set — to Garrett. Viewers get the first hint that he's catching feelings for Hannah in a butterflies-inducing moment the next day when, as he boards the bus to a game, he looks up The Beaches on his phone. According to Laurie Lee Boutet, The Beaches' manager, *Off Campus* has changed everything for the band: "It was the strongest fan acquisition moment I've ever seen in my life, outside of viral TikToks. My jaw was on the floor."

The show's inclusion of The Beaches' "Edge of the Earth" almost functioned "like an ad," Boutet continues. "People have called me and asked, 'Did you pay them for this?' I didn't, obviously." As is customary, music supervisors compensate artists for the use of their songs onscreen. "We just got lucky the placement was so good," Boutet says. "It uplifted their entire catalog." To further fuel the new interest that *Off Campus* generated, Boutet contacted Coachella organizers to get the 2025 performance of "Edge of the Earth" referenced in the show onto YouTube, and the festival obliged. (After the band and song names, a parenthetical in the YouTube clip title reads "for Hannah and Garrett from *Off Campus*," an intentional choice by The Beaches' team to boost traffic.)

As a result, "Edge of the Earth" grew 2,309% in official on-demand U.S. streams in the four weeks following the show's debut and the YouTube Coachella clip has earned over 298,000 views since it was uploaded in mid-May. At Obsessed Fest, a recent Amazon Prime event in Los Angeles, the band performed alongside the cast.

"I actually still don't think we've realized the full impact of the show — like, we can see it in the streaming data, but I think we're going to see more with their next tour," Boutet says. "Selling tickets is where you really start to see how strong the fan acquisition has been."

If this new golden age of synchs had a bellwether moment, it may have been the release of the first season of *Euphoria* in June 2019, which turned Gen Zers on to a cool, eclectic mix of music ranging from Beyoncé and Labrinth to Andy Williams and Air Supply. But it truly hit a zenith in May 2022, in a climactic scene in season four of *Stranger Things*. Sadie Sink's character, Max, is under the spell of a villainous force — until her friends thrust headphones onto her playing her favorite song: Kate Bush's beloved 1985 track "Running Up That Hill."

It felt like "a lightning-in-a-bottle moment," *Stranger Things* music supervisor Norah Felder recalls. "It was just the right song with the right message." But in the years since that synch — shorthand for the license required to "synchronize" a song with a moving picture — "Running Up That Hill" proved to be an early warning shot of a larger phenomenon to come. When first released, Bush's song peaked on the Billboard Hot 100 at No. 30, then disappeared from the chart for almost 40 years. Thanks to *Stranger Things* fans, it came roaring back in June 2022 stronger than ever before at No. 8, eventually peaking at No. 3 later that summer.

"I knew this was an important moment in the show," Felder remembers. "So I gave [showrunners the Duffer Brothers] a few ideas. I said, 'Here's some ideas, but FYI, I really think that "Running Up That Hill" meets all the check marks of what you're looking for.' It almost felt like this was written for the moment: Somebody who was struggling, who didn't feel like she was being heard, who had this massive hill to climb and wasn't able to do it."

Finding a perfect song for a scene doesn't guarantee a music supervisor will secure it. Show budgets need to be considered, and the price tag for licensing a song ranges widely depending on the stature of the artist and the nature of its use. "The price of songs has gone up quite a bit," Jen Malone, music supervisor for *Euphoria* and *Wednesday*, recently explained to *Billboard*. "It was gradual, but with a real jump after the pandemic," making it harder for music supervisors to both stay within budget and get their first-choice selections.

For music supervisors working in TV, where synch budgets are often tighter than for films, this isn't a new challenge. *One Tree Hill* music supervisor Lindsay Wolfington says she remembers times when the budget couldn't stretch any further on the show, which licensed between five and 15 songs per week in a typically 22-episode season, prompting her team to get creative and to offer "ad cards" at the end of the show. "At the end of the episode, it would say, 'Tonight you heard music by this person,' and then we put up the album cover of a band we'd use. We'd get a fee break for that marketing."

In the age of Shazam and streaming, the ad card has become a relic. These days, shows like *Off Campus*, *Stranger Things*, *Euphoria* and *The Summer I Turned Pretty* still log about five to 15 needle drops per episode — but their seasons are often less than half the length of cable and network shows of the past. Plus, streaming shows often shoot episodes a year in advance of release, whereas before, episodes were sometimes shot in real time. As Romanoff notes, this can be both a blessing and a curse to a music supervisor. "A song that [was] massive as we were shooting this show in summer 2025 might feel more dated in 2026," which may partially explain the current penchant for decades-old synchs. "Something that's a year old that really permeated the culture today is going to feel more dated than an older, timeless song that we're resurfacing to a newer audience."

Even if the price is right for the artist, some high-profile talents are known for being "difficult. Well, no, that's not the right word at all — some artists are particular," Felder says. "It's OK — I'm particular too. For Kate Bush, she wants

HOW TO CHANGE (AN ARTIST'S) LIFE

The Song	The Show	Official U.S. on-demand streams, week prior to episode airing*	Two weeks after airing
"Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)," Kate Bush	*Stranger Things*	162,000	**28,658,179**
"Dirty Work," Steely Dan	*Euphoria*	344,359	**909,536**
"Bed on Fire," G Flip	*Off Campus*	3,631	**647,267**
"Edge of the Earth," The Beaches	*Off Campus*	88,071	**1,004,091**
"Goo Goo Muck," The Cramps	*Wednesday*	23,152	**811,748**
"Mystery of Love," Sufjan Stevens	*The Summer I Turned Pretty*	531,447	**1,265,022**

*According to Luminate

In the early to mid-aughts, *Grey's Anatomy* (top) helped usher in a golden age of synchs; with Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill" on *Stranger Things* (bottom), a new one exploded.

GREY'S ANATOMY: VIVIAN ZINK/DISNEY/GETTY IMAGES; STRANGER THINGS: COURTESY OF NETFLIX.

Euphoria **(top) primed Gen Z viewers for an eclectic mix of old and new synchs; on *The OC*, music venue The Bait Shop gave writers an excuse to get their favorite bands like The Killers (bottom) on the show.**

EUPHORIA: EDDY CHEN/HBO. THE OC: WB/COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION.

to make sure the stories her songs are synched in line up with the messages she wants to be known for in her music." Thankfully, after crafting a personal note to Bush about what the moment would mean in *Stranger Things*, Felder learned she was already a fan of the show — her son had showed her an episode years before. She approved the use.

That approach can work with current superstars, too. Taylor Swift, who rarely approves licenses for her music in film and TV shows, agreed to more than 20 of her songs being used across the three seasons of *The Summer I Turned Pretty* due to the intentionality of the placements and the connection she felt to the protagonist, Belly (Lola Tung). "This show has completely used my music in the most thoughtful, beautiful ways and [in the most] important moments in Belly's life," Swift told Ryan Seacrest in an interview last year. "I feel like my music comes from inside her mind."

These days, however, as musicians witness just how often a synch can change a career, they're much more likely to give approval than they were in the early 2000s. While The Fray frontman Joe King was one of the biggest beneficiaries of that early synch wave — when his band's "How To Save a Life" was featured on soapy medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* in 2006 and, later, *The OC* — he wasn't onboard with the idea immediately. "I remember I was really debating whether we should do it and was unsure," he says. "I didn't want it to hurt us. There was this fear of backlash back then [from] associating your art with commerce."

After speaking with his sister and grandmother, who were *Grey's Anatomy* fans, he warmed to the idea. It proved to be a wise choice. The show ultimately gave the band its first hit when "How To Save a Life" climbed to No. 3 on the Hot 100. "We didn't write the song for the show," he explains — but much like "Running Up That Hill," the whole moment felt like it "was just the right place, right time, right song."

In 2004, a representative from what was then A&M Records reached out to the producers of *One Tree Hill*, asking if they would consider writing Sheryl Crow into an upcoming episode to promote her new greatest-hits compilation, *The Very Best of Sheryl Crow*, released in November 2003. "This was the time when people realized that TV could be a marketing tool for music," Wolfington says.

One of the executive producers was a major fan of the singer-songwriter, and Wolfington recalls Crow flying out to Los Angeles on Super Bowl Sunday to record a scene in which the artist orders a coffee at the local cafe, and one of the show's main characters, Haley (Bethany Joy Lenz), asks Crow if she'll play a song in lieu of paying for it. Crow obliges, heading for the cafe's small stage and picking up her guitar to begin her cover of Cat Stevens' "The First Cut Is the Deepest," a new track on the compilation and its first single.

"We realized, 'Hey, if these opportunities present themselves, we should do them,' " Wolfington recalls of sensing that a symbiotic relationship was forming between popular artists and TV shows. Since its pilot, *One Tree Hill* had favored licensed pop songs over original score, including its theme song, "I Don't Want To Be," by fedora-wearing soft rocker Gavin DeGraw. "It didn't feel right to have a traditional score in the show. When you're in your teens, there's music everywhere. Whether you're in the art room, at a cafe, when you walk down the high school hallway — this was a showrunner decision, but it didn't seem like a surprising mandate," she says.

By season two, Wolfington says that *One Tree Hill* writers had tailored Hilarie Burton's character, Peyton, to allow for more natural musical cameos, like Crow's, on the show. Peyton, a rebellious cheerleader who loves music, starts working for a new all-ages club called TRIC, and over the course of the series, 12 artists (plus even more characters, like Haley) performed on *One Tree Hill*, many of them at TRIC.

One Tree Hill's peak coincided with what was arguably the last true decade of teen monoculture. From the late 1990s through the 2010s, teen TV was booming — MTV's *Total Request Live* felt like required viewing for anyone ages 13-19, and other young-adult programming, often on The WB and ABC Family, cornered the market on high school dramas with hits like *Beverly Hills: 90210* (1990-2000), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Smallville* (2001-11) and *The OC* (2003-07). The throughline across all of this era's material? Pop music.

90210 in particular pioneered writing in hangout spots for the characters that were perfectly set up for musical cameos. On *90210* it was the Peach Pit; later, in *The OC*, it was The Bait Shop. In a 2004 interview with *TV Guide*, *The OC* creator Josh Schwartz admitted that one reason The Bait Shop was incorporated into plotlines was so that the show's team had an excuse to invite their favorite bands, including The Killers, Death Cab for Cutie and Modest Mouse, to play on it. It allowed them to sell Bait Shop-themed merchandise and served a narrative purpose: "We needed a parent-free place for the kids to hang out. Someplace where the Yoo-hoo flowed all night long," Schwartz joked.

It's hard to pinpoint precisely why this music-heavy TV trend kicked off around the turn of the 21st century and why artists finally saw the value in it. But shows like ABC's *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), an early licensor of songs for TV, certainly laid the groundwork for the phenomenon, before the success of *90210*, *Melrose Place*, *Party of Five* and more in the '90s proved there was a wide viewership for soapy teen-oriented shows with a strong affinity for pop music. And in a 2025 interview with *Billboard*, Jeff Waye, CEO of independent publisher Third Side Music, articulated another important factor: In the Napster age, artists didn't have much of a choice but to take the check. "You could die on the hill of not doing synch all you wanted, but when record sales dried up in the 2000s and it got harder to make a living, things started to change," he explained.

Methods of music consumption also changed completely between the popular shows of Krieg Thomas and Romanoff's teen years that inspired them to become music supervisors and today's hits like *Off Campus*. A fan of Crow's performance on *One Tree Hill* in 2004 would have likely picked up her album at a brick-and-mortar record store, or perhaps bought the song at the iTunes Store, which had just launched the year before. For all the success of "How To Save a Life" thanks to its placement on popular TV shows, King tells *Billboard* he doesn't recall anything exploding overnight in the way artists like Bush have experienced now. *Billboard* chart data bears that out: "How To Save a Life" debuted on the Hot 100 at No. 93 in April 2006, a month after its moment on *Grey's Anatomy*, and began a slow climb up to No. 3 in October of that year. Meanwhile, Bush's "Running Up That Hill" debuted at No. 8 just two weeks after the episode aired, peaking at No. 3 another two weeks after that.

"It was a much larger barrier to entry to relive your favorite TV moment with the music then," explains Spotify senior editor Claire Heinichen, whose team works on the streaming service's official companion playlists for shows like *Off Campus*. Wolfington recalls trying to track the impact of synchs and ad cards back in the aughts and struggling to find clear data: "There was a time when I really tried to collect the data, but I usually wouldn't get any feedback for a while and someone would tell me, 'Oh, album sales went up 3,000% last week.' But it was hard to see the impact on just that one song and its success afterward."

"Now [your favorite synch moments] live in the show, they live on your Spotify playlist, they play in your car," Heinichen says. "You can see a fan edit of the show on your TikTok feed to the song. It's become so that everywhere, all the time you get to live in these moments." Spotify and other streaming services have encouraged the trend by creating official playlists that list songs featured in top TV shows or films in order of appearance for easy consumption.

"We've seen artists that have very deep background songs, like ones where no one would likely have pulled them out of the show, are still getting streaming bumps," Romanoff says. "Some fans will find a song through the playlist for the show, not through the show." As Krieg Thomas adds, "Streaming has also opened up new value for shows because, back in the day, if your show was entirely preexisting licensed songs, it was very hard to release a meaningful soundtrack. Now you can."

Madison Norris, who leads synch licensing for music publisher and catalog buyer Round Hill Music, adds that "the growth of Netflix and Amazon Prime and Disney+ has [also] globalized the impact of a placement," making synchs far more valuable for today's artists than those in the aughts.

And now — at a time when over 100,000 songs are uploaded to streaming services daily, according to Luminate, and TikTok's algorithm is less predictable than ever — landing a synch on a show like *Off Campus* can turn out to be a more surefire bet for an emerging artist than a viral video.

Pop singer-songwriter Carol Ades, whose song "Hope Is a Scary Thing" was used in *Off Campus*, says the success of the show reminded her that "people just needed to hear my music. If they just hear it, they really like it." The track had been out for two years already by the time *Off Campus* debuted, and while it resonated with her core fans from day one, "Hope Is a Scary Thing" never got its breakout moment. In the four weeks since the show debuted, the song has grown by 5,595% in official on-demand U.S. streams.

"Everything is so saturated today," Ades says. "There's so much music, which is amazing, but you also just can't hear it all. So it's often an exposure game for artists. This just felt so good because I really needed that reminder of 'Oh, right. I just need the right people to hear it.' "

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JOHN COLTRANE AT 100

A Century Supreme

Verve Label Group president/CEO Jamie Krents on discovering new recordings and new audiences for the icon's centennial celebration

BY GAIL MITCHELL

WHAT DO CHAKA KHAN, Ariana Grande, OutKast and Beastie Boys have in common? Jazz legend John Coltrane.

On her 1982 self-titled album, Khan sampled the 1960 Coltrane gem "Giant Steps" for "Be-Bop Medley." Grande's 2019 Billboard Hot 100 No. 1 "7 Rings" interpolates the melody of the seminal jazz saxophonist's 1961 freestyle take on the *Sound of Music* classic "My Favorite Things." Hip-hop icons OutKast covered "My Favorite Things" in their own inimitable style on the pair's Grammy-winning album *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*. And Beastie Boys tapped into the Coltrane catalog by sampling "Part 1: Acknowledgement" from the late artist's 1965 masterpiece, *A Love Supreme*, for its "Song for Junior" on 1998's *Hello Nasty*, which sold more than 3 million copies, according to Luminate.

These are just some of the artists who have interacted with Coltrane's work. The late genius inspired everyone from David Bowie to Mac Miller and infiltrated popular culture through prestige film and TV such as *Vanilla Sky*, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Such use of Coltrane's music speaks volumes of the artist's legacy and explains why Verve Label Group is supporting a yearlong global celebration of the 100th anniversary of John William Coltrane's birth on Sept. 23.

Under the direction of Jamie Krents, president/CEO of Verve Label Group (which includes Coltrane's home base, Impulse! Records) and president/CEO of the global catalog division Universal Music Enterprises (UMe), the centennial celebration kicked off in January with the Impulse! release of the limited edition, two-album vinyl compilation *Essential John Coltrane*. In April, the New York State Legislature commemorated the centennial with a special resolution to celebrate the "hero to Harlem residents." State lawmakers were joined by representatives of Verve/Impulse! and the Coltrane estate, who together are organizing the series of events being planned in tribute to the musician, who died in 1967 at the age of 40.

And not just Verve/Impulse! are involved, Krents says. Sister label Blue Note released two special editions of 1958's *Blue Train* in June. And in the run-up to the major birthday week celebration in September, salutes are also being put together by Atlantic Records and BMG/Concord's Craft Records.

"What I love is that you're seeing his influence resonate across many different parts of the world," Krents says. "Kendrick Lamar has been incredibly effusive about his love for Coltrane, as have Flea, Bill Clinton and Flying Lotus. You're getting people from all walks of life shouting him out.

"Coltrane is spiritual music that can absolutely transcend genre," Krents adds. "It's meditative, sometimes very intense but always spiritual; a sound for which he is the forefather. He's just so unassailable. You can put on any Coltrane record and no one's ever going to say that sounds old-fashioned. The mark of great music is that it's timeless. And John Coltrane is one of the great archetypes of timeless music."

Top: Coltrane. Bottom: The *Tiberi Tapes* album will arrive in September.

When did you begin planning this centennial?

JAMIE KRENTS I've worked at Impulse! since the late '90s but during the last 10 years there's been an incredible amount of unreleased Coltrane music. We released *Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album*. It was a studio session that had never seen the light of day and was an incredible success for us in 2018. Because of that, there's been a number of lost Coltrane records that we've done, a lot of them live. Then about two years ago, we realized we better get our act together because Coltrane would be 100 years old. We've been working closely with the estate — [his heirs] Ravi and Michelle Coltrane in particular, while their lawyer, Michael Frisch, in many ways is the quarterback for a lot of the activity.

How does it feel when you discover a lost album, especially a live recording?

If I ever get used to it, it'll be time for me to go. You partially feel like Indiana Jones finding some treasure. Whether you like jazz or not, Coltrane's a master of music like Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis or Bob Marley. So having anything at this point that hasn't been released and heard? It's unbelievable when you're among the first people to hear this music. Then you're filled with anxiety and excitement, but you better not mess it up and you better make sure the Coltrane family feels this is music that John would have felt proud to release.

Now you have another lost album on tap, *The Tiberi Tapes*.

Frank Tiberi — a great saxophonist in his own right and an educator — followed the Coltrane band around for four years [1961-65]. He recorded their club shows up and down the East Coast with a portable tape player, an enormous piece of equipment. Frank would lug this thing around to document the evolution of Coltrane's classic quartet with Elvin Jones [drums], McCoy Tyner [piano] and Jimmy Garrison [bass].

It was a folk tale that these tapes existed, as they'd never seen the light of day. We were finally able to make an arrangement with Frank, who is still alive, to release the very best of those hundreds of hours of recordings. We've curated it down to a four-LP, two-CD set that will come out Sept. 25. That's the hero project for us this year. It's not just a bootleg of a live show, it truly captures one of the most iconic bands of all time. People are going to lose their minds.

What other strategies is Verve implementing on behalf of the centennial?

In addition to very beautiful-sounding releases, we're making sure everything's available to stream. One of our real goals this year isn't just to preach to the choir. There are so many people out there who may know the name John Coltrane or maybe they've heard a little of his music. But given their algorithms, they're maybe not getting served with this music when they log in to their [digital service provider] of choice. So we're working to make sure younger people and longtime fans know that there's something for everybody. We're releasing *Africa/Brass*, a more orchestrated record that John did [as his Impulse! debut]. We're releasing *Meditations*, which also has that quality to it. Then there's *Live at Birdland* coming in October. We're trying to cover all the Coltrane chapters because he made so many different kinds of records. *A Love Supreme* is probably his most iconic recording. However, it isn't the whole story. It would be like just playing *Abbey Road* for somebody and not playing what The Beatles sounded like in Germany in 1965. It's important to show people the whole spectrum.

How else is this younger generation of music fans being courted?

Through a combination of playlisting plus helping people find Coltrane through curated collections and other content as we work with the estate. For example, we're creating new visuals because so much of the way that young people discover music now isn't just through listening but seeing things on TikTok, YouTube or Instagram. There are a couple of animated clips and other visual materials that fans will be seeing over the course of the year as we approach the release of *The Tiberi Tapes* and Coltrane's birthday week.

Speaking of the birthday week, Los Angeles' Hollywood Bowl will premiere "Coltrane 100: Legacy," a symphonic reimagination of his popular works.

That's something the estate put together with saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin headlining. There are a lot of tributes happening this year. The band Butcher Brown and trumpeter Nicholas Payton paid tribute to Coltrane at the recent Jazz Fest in New Orleans. There are so many people who love John Coltrane and are taking it on themselves to celebrate. But the Hollywood Bowl event is probably the biggest thing the estate is involved in, and that's happening on Sept. 23 [Coltrane's birthday]. We're also going to do a listening event at the Van Gelder Studio [in New York] on the 23rd. It's where sound engineer Rudy Van Gelder recorded Coltrane's most iconic records.

I can't go into total details now, but we're working on a mini-documentary with several important people from a variety of disciplines — be it skateboarders, rock stars or actors — talking about what Coltrane's music means to them. [Verve's] Oliver Schrage, who's leading marketing on the project, is currently working on that with talented director Atiba Jefferson. That will come out in the fall as well.

What's your take on the current state of jazz?

This is the best ecosystem I've seen for jazz, particularly the last five or six years. There's singer Samara Joy winning the Grammy for best new artist [in 2023]; Jon Batiste with his background as a jazz musician [winning multiple] Grammys in 2022. Then all the way to people like Kamasi Washington. And it's not just in the U.S. You have English group Ezra Collective, the first jazz act to win the Mercury Prize in 2023. Jazz is more vibrant than ever. Some of this is a function of younger people not being so hung up on genres and also just discovering music from different eras. We're seeing music from 20 years ago or older become hits again. They're not worried about what genre they're listening to, they just like good music.

And I don't see any signs of it slowing down. Laufey is also having an incredible career. She's a good example of showing that traditional jazz and music influenced by jazz can find a larger audience. She's also a Coltrane fan, while Billie Eilish is a big fan of Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald. [And] the Newport Jazz Festival sells out every year now.

What is the most important outcome that Verve is hoping for when this centennial year closes?

There's a book about Impulse! by Ashley Kahn called *The House That Trane Built*, so it would be a dereliction of duty to not do everything we can to ensure that exponentially more people become Coltrane fans. Every time I listen to Coltrane, I hear something new. Like every time you watch a great movie, you see something new. Tribute concerts, reissues, new music releases ... those are our mechanisms, the gateways for people to go back into the catalog. We're living in an age of short attention spans and algorithms; swiping and skipping. That doesn't necessarily favor deep spiritual music all the time. But in this case, I don't think you can deny John Coltrane. Our team — some of whom are in their 20s and 30s — is completely focused on making sure that he has a much bigger audience by the end of this year than he did when we started. b

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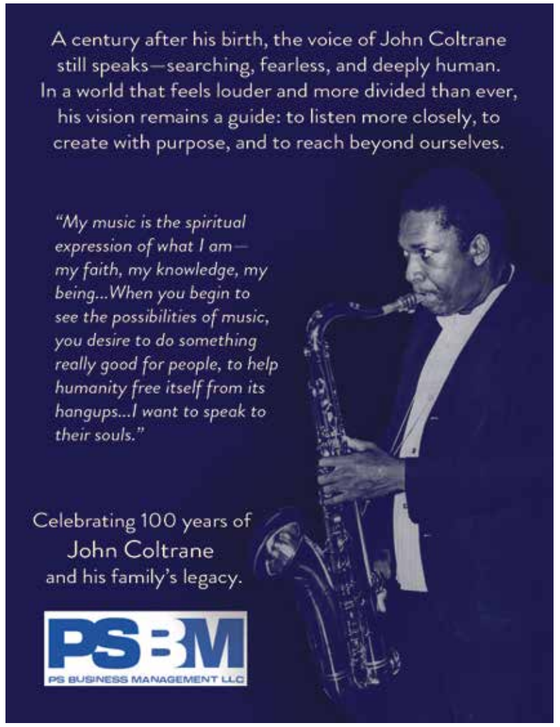

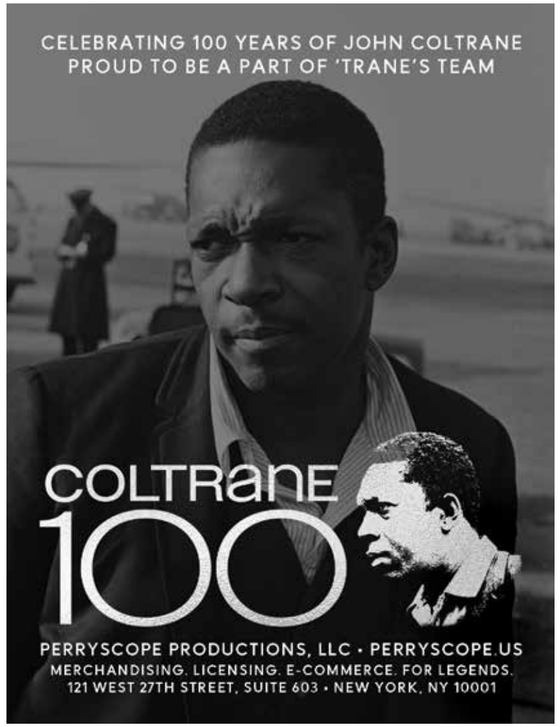

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2026 Top Music Lawyers

The savviest legal minds in the business are advising superstars, guiding executives, buying catalogs — and watching over their shoulders as AI rises

IT ALL BEGINS WITH A SONG, goes the music business maxim.

Getting paid for a song all begins with the copyright, say the lawyers.

The ability of creators to protect their work through copyright is so fundamental that the legal concept appears in the U.S. Constitution, which grants Congress the power "to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts."

The Founding Fathers, however, never anticipated generative artificial intelligence.

Generative AI tools used in music have evolved by ingesting massive amounts of data about songs originally created — and copyrighted — by songwriters, artists, recording companies and music publishers. It is transformational technology — but some have called it digital theft.

What's undeniable is that the issue has consumed the legal community's attention in recent years, including many of the attorneys chosen for *Billboard*'s 2026 Top Music Lawyers list.

The attorneys listed here — nominated by their firms and peers and chosen by *Billboard* editors — guide superstars and industry-driving companies. They negotiate recording deals, global tours and catalog sales, and their legal savvy is essential to the music business now more than ever.

"I am sure it comes as no surprise to anyone that artificial intelligence continues to present the most important legal issues facing the music industry," says Venable partner J. Douglas Baldridge, who has also worked as the in-house counsel for Taylor Swift's 13 Management.

A little more than two years ago, the three major music groups — Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group — were each plaintiffs in lawsuits against leading music AI companies Suno and Udio, alleging their technology had unlawfully copied the groups' songs to train AI models to generate music that could "saturate the market with machine-generated content that will directly compete with" human artists.

Many AI companies argue that copyright law's fair use doctrine protects such training, because it transforms those millions of songs into something entirely new. But musicians and labels say that provision was not intended to allow a trillion-dollar industry to be built on the backs of unpaid artists.

Warner Music Group has since struck licensing deals to settle its suits against Suno and Udio, while Universal has done the same with Udio. Sony and Universal continue their legal actions against Suno while Sony is still in court against Udio.

Music companies and trade groups, trying to avoid the mistakes of previous technological revolutions and recognizing it's better to pay copyright owners than lawyers, have increasingly sought partnerships in which AI content can be licensed with limits on how the technology can be used. Most recently, the National Music Publishers' Association announced licensing deals with Udio and KLAY, another AI company.

But some music creators have responded to such licensing moves by urging caution.

In late June, a worldwide coalition of artists, songwriters and managers' groups released a letter aimed at record labels and publishers forming AI music licensing deals. They object to the rise of contracts that ask them to give up their rights over how AI uses their work, among other concerns.

"The future of music," their letter states, "must be built with artists, songwriters and their representatives, not imposed on them."

And if music creators disagree with how AI is deployed, expect them to call their lawyers. **—THOM DUFFY**

Music Groups

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James Mullan
EXECUTIVE VP OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS/INTERNATIONAL GENERAL COUNSEL

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Stephanie Yu
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David Jacoby
SENIOR VP/HEAD OF U.S. LITIGATION

Richard Katz
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Michael Roberson
SENIOR VP OF U.S. BUSINESS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Jennifer Womack
SENIOR VP/HEAD OF BUSINESS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS AND PRODUCTION OPERATIONS, SONY MUSIC VISION

FORMERLY OF SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

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Maryrose Maness
SENIOR VP/DEPUTY GENERAL COUNSEL

Trent Tappe
SENIOR VP/DEPUTY GENERAL COUNSEL/CHIEF COMPLIANCE OFFICER

Rob Faulstich
VP OF BUSINESS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Chapman (left) and Luke Combs at the Grammys in 2024.

AGUIRRE: COURTESY OF DANIELLE AGUIRRE; CHAPMAN, JOHN SHEARER/GETTY IMAGES.

NATIONAL MUSIC PUBLISHERS' ASSOCIATION

Danielle Aguirre
COO/CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER

Aguirre

As Danielle Aguirre walked onstage at the annual meeting of the National Music Publishers' Association in New York on June 10, the sound system played two deep, familiar notes: "dun dun." The audience laughed in recognition of the *Law & Order* theme.

A 15-year veteran of legal battles at the NMPA, Aguirre is proud of the work her team has done "in negotiating the first industrywide AI agreements for independent music publishers," she says.

The NMPA does not shy away from taking legal action against AI companies when necessary, "and I credit many of our member publishers for protecting their rights — and by extension the rights of all publishers — in court," Aguirre says.

"But I also know there is a place, and in fact a necessity, to move forward with good actor AI companies as business partners," she continues. "NMPA wants to ensure those opportunities are available to all music publishers — that is what our deals with Udio and KLAY seek to accomplish."

AI is far from the only legal matter demanding Aguirre's focus: "Streaming fraud is a massive problem that requires more attention," she says. "While it has always been an issue, the rise of AI has led to an ability to conduct fraud on an unprecedented scale on digital platforms. It's an issue that is costing the industry billions and it's time for all parties to sit down and find solutions."

As an attorney practicing in the music industry, Aguirre is also a fan.

"I absolutely loved Tracy Chapman's performance at the 2024 Grammys," she says. " 'Fast Car' is iconic and personally meaningful, and for me, her voice has always been what makes that song so beautiful and impactful. That was a pinch-me moment." —T.D.

Congratulations to

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From left: Maggie Rogers, Ben Harper, Eugene Hutz, Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Depp, Michael Stipe and Smith onstage during "People Have the Power: A Celebration of Patti Smith," presented by Michael Dorf at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2025.

CARROLL GUIDO GROFFMAN COHEN BAR & KARALIAN

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PARTNERS

Few women in music law have had the longstanding influence and impact of Rosemary Carroll.

When the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story on rising female forces in the music business under the headline "Attacking the Old Boys From the Outside," Carroll was one of the influential women the newspaper cited — in 1994.

When fellow Top Music Lawyers honoree Dina LaPolt held a book party in New York this past winter to celebrate the publication of her memoir, she shouted out Carroll as an inspiration.

Carroll

And when Carroll celebrated her birthday, longtime client Patti Smith wrote on Instagram: "This is my dear friend, lawyer and representative, Rosemary Carroll," describing the attorney as "my fierce and gentle protector."

But ask Carroll to highlight recent achievements in her legal career and she'll demur, for the privacy of her clients. "With all respect, I'm not going to answer this question because I don't want to name my clients or discuss their contractual status," she says.

When asked about the most pressing issue in the music business, however, Carroll is forthcoming and direct: "The most important legal issue facing the music industry today is the same as the issue facing all industries and, indeed, all sentient beings: how to curtail our country's incipient slide into fascism, which is sponsored by MAGA, hastened by the failure of many of our elected leaders to mount an effective resistance and allowed by our own complacency," she says.

When asked to cite a favorite recent musical moment, Carroll's response is not surprising. At "People Have the Power: A Celebration of Patti Smith," held at New York's Carnegie Hall in March 2025, "it was interesting to watch artists who've been influenced by Patti pay their respects to her by reading her words and performing her songs and [then] after that, it was energizing, exciting and inspiring to watch Patti's performance." **–T.D.**

SMITH: TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; CARROLL: COURTESY OF ROSEMARY CARROLL

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Elizabeth Moody, a veteran music tech lawyer at Granderson Des Rochers, has been instrumental in the creation of industry-shaking AI licensing deals over the last year. She served as lead negotiator and strategist for both ElevenLabs and Udio, two of the biggest AI music companies to have come to the table with the mainstream music industry thus far.

In the case of ElevenLabs, the AI voice company came to Moody early upon deciding to enter the music space. Moody helped ElevenLabs ink groundbreaking deals with Kobalt and Merlin last August so that, from the jump, the company's AI music models would be legally trained on licensed songs.

(In April, AI music generator ElevenMusic launched featuring about 4,000 human artists on the platform — mostly emerging acts — whose music can be streamed or remixed by users. It also includes the two volumes of its self-assembled *The Eleven Album* series, which showcases AI-assisted music made alongside participating artists, including Liza Minnelli and Art Garfunkel.)

Moody

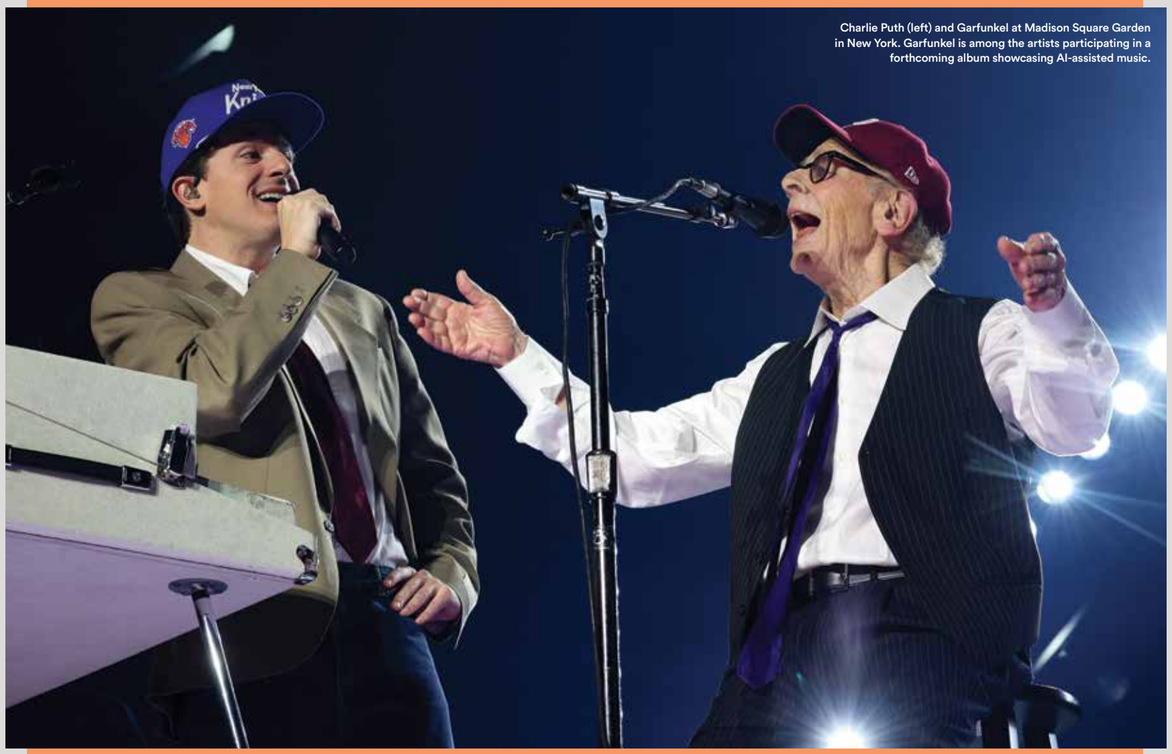
Udio was a different story. That company initially trained its AI model on unlicensed music, and all three major-label music groups in 2024 sued both Udio and rival Suno for widespread copyright infringement. Initially, Udio and Suno both fought off the lawsuits with the same team of attorneys. But then Udio's new CEO sought to change direction and negotiate with the industry in earnest, so he hired Moody, who has since helped Udio reach licensing deals with Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, Kobalt, Merlin, Believe and the National Music Publishers' Association.

"When a company is working with me, it's because they want to work with the music industry," Moody says. "I firmly believe that artists and songwriters should be paid fairly and have control. I've been told, and this is my goal, that my reputation is that I am going to do the right thing."

Moody's reputation certainly does precede her. Since long before the advent of AI, she has been known as the go-to attorney for tech companies that want to play ball with rights holders in the music industry. She's shepherded everyone from video game companies to blockchain firms through the negotiation of music licensing deals and has provided legal counsel to streaming platforms like YouTube and Pandora. Moody has now taken this experience into the wild west of AI rights, where she represents over a dozen emerging companies who've chosen to work with, instead of against, the music industry.

"It's more important to be in the conversation," Moody says of this fast-moving new technology. "You're not going to prevent AI from happening, so let's figure out how to do it collaboratively."

—RACHEL SCHARF


Charlie Puth (left) and Garfunkel at Madison Square Garden in New York. Garfunkel is among the artists participating in a forthcoming album showcasing AI-assisted music.

MOODY: DAVID GOFF; PUTH: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES.

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Greenberg Traurig is recognized as a leader in the world of media and entertainment law and Rosenbloum, with more than three decades of experience, has guided deals at the intersection of music and technology for some 250-plus businesses, from startups to Fortune 500 firms.

His clients have included OpenAI, Spotify, Meta, Snap, the Recording Academy, the Country Music Association and Epic Games.

Rosenbloum

Over the past 18 months, Rosenbloum oversaw the negotiation strategy for new media rights deals for the Grammy Awards and the Country Music Association Awards.

The Grammys and other Recording Academy programming will be simulcast on ABC, Disney+ and Hulu beginning in 2027. The CMA Awards, meanwhile, announced a six-year extension of its deal with Disney through 2032. This November, the CMA Awards will stream on Disney+ for the first time, in addition to its traditional broadcast on ABC.

"In today's rapidly evolving media rights landscape, and [with] the dramatic shift from linear television to streaming, assisting with the overall strategy for the futures of these two important music industry institutions — both of which recognize and celebrate the pinnacle of music artistry — at a pivotal moment in their respective histories has been one of the most significant achievements and privileges of my career," Rosenbloum says. For Rosenbloum, an avowed country music fan, the CMA Awards negotiations were particularly noteworthy. His firm represents Brooks & Dunn, and he calls the duo's performance of its song "Believe" with Jelly Roll at the 2024 CMA Awards "one of my favorite musical moments of all time."

Without question, he explains, "legal issues associated with artificial intelligence are the most significant ones confronting the music industry today."

At Greenberg Traurig, he says, "our practice group has adopted the decided approach of working only with technology companies in the space that respect intellectual property rights of the key players in the recorded-music industry, and we have been at the forefront of licensing arrangements in the space."

He adds, "Like many other industries, it is going to be critical for the music industry to adapt to these new technologies and find ways to seize upon new opportunities presented by them. History has shown that fighting against new technologies is futile and is likely to set the industry back many years. Creative business and licensing arrangements will be key to long-term growth and prosperity."

—T.D.

From left: Kix Brooks, Jelly Roll and Ronnie Dunn onstage at the CMA Awards in 2024.

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Prince

Merger Mania Reshapes The Music Industry Again

As major players in the business realign under complex deals, top law firms are at the forefront of the negotiations

The recent string of blockbuster music mergers — and the complex deals that govern them — has offered plenty of work for the teams of corporate, tax, antitrust and intellectual property lawyers who have helped negotiate, paper and win approval for them.

In February, Universal's Virgin Music Group officially completed its $775 million acquisition of Downtown Music Holdings, one of the world's biggest artist-services companies, after a lengthy review by competition authorities in the European Union. A team from the law firm Kirkland & Ellis represented Virgin, while Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom advised Downtown.

A month later, Primary Wave announced it was acquiring Kobalt, creating a new $7 billion powerhouse independent music company. The deal will combine the huge portfolio of Primary Wave — which owns music and other rights associated with Prince, Whitney Houston, Bob Marley, Britney Spears, The Notorious B.I.G. and many others — with Kobalt, the world's largest independent music publisher and a tech-forward administration platform.

For that complex tie-up, the firm Paul Hastings represented Primary Wave, while Kobalt was repped by both Kirkland & Ellis and White & Case.

Then in April, an even bigger deal was made public: BMG, which represents artists like Jelly Roll and Lainey Wilson, said it would combine with Concord — owner of songs by artists including Creedence Clearwater Revival, Phil Collins and R.E.M. — in one of the biggest music industry mergers in years.

While the new BMG-Concord would still trail the majors in market share by a significant amount, the combined entity could be considered something of a "quiet major," given its huge portfolio and estimated $2 billion in yearly revenue, which will give it the financial muscle for capital-intensive artist development, technology and catalog investments.

BMG was represented by the firms Davis Polk & Wardell and ArentFox Schiff, Concord was represented by Latham & Watkins and Reed Smith, and Great Mountain Partners, a financial backer of Concord for years, was represented by the firm Alston & Bird.

–BILL DONAHUE

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When Live Nation went to trial this spring in an existential antitrust lawsuit filed by the U.S. Department of Justice, it entrusted its legal defense to veteran Latham & Watkins litigators Marriott and Pfeiffer.

The feds and dozens of state attorneys general accused the concert giant of operating an illegal monopoly over live music and sought nothing less than a court order forcing Live Nation to sell its Ticketmaster subsidiary. But as the trial began, Marriott fired back that there was little actual evidence to back up those claims.

"These are words. They are not proof, they are not evidence," Marriott told the jury during his opening statement. "This marketplace is more competitive than ever before."

Marriott

Pfeiffer

Marriott is a seasoned trial attorney best known for his antitrust work but also experienced in intellectual property and other high-stakes commercial disputes. He joined Latham last summer after nearly three decades at Cravath Swaine & Moore, where he also represented Live Nation.

Pfeiffer is another longtime antitrust lawyer who's been at Latham for nearly two decades. He's handled a number of high-profile matters, including music cases like repping the Radio Music License Committee in a major antitrust case against performing rights organization SESAC.

The two were joined on the Live Nation trial team by Latham's Gass, as well numerous other attorneys from the firm, including Timothy L. O'Mara, Jennifer L. Giordano, Kelly S. Fayne, Lindsey S. Champlin and Robin L. Gushman.

After six weeks of trial, the jury ultimately sided against Marriott, Pfeiffer and Live Nation, finding the company to be an illegal monopoly. But the case is far from over; Live Nation's lawyers are battling for a new trial and for a more limited punishment than the divestiture of Ticketmaster that the states are requesting. If those efforts fail, the company has vowed to appeal the case to overturn the verdict.

—B.D.

LIVE NATION: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES. MARIOTT AND PFEIFFER: COURTESY OF GITTINGS/GLOBAL.

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See story, page 104.

Blondie's Debbie Harry

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In May, when Sony Music Publishing, backed by Sony Music Group, made its third and biggest acquisition of Hipgnosis-originated music assets from the private equity firm Blackstone, it brought the total of the three deals between Sony and Blackstone close to $4 billion.

At the time, there was much industry discussion surrounding the assets' final valuation versus past assessments made by Citrin Cooperman and Shot Tower Capital, the two financial firms that handled valuations when Hipgnosis Songs Fund was still a publicly traded entity.

Hipgnosis was founded in 2018 by Merck Mercuriadis, who began an acquisition spree buying music assets consisting of approximately 110 catalog deals through two investment funds: the publicly traded Hipgnosis Songs Fund and the private Hipgnosis Songs Capital, backed by Blackstone.

Leibowitz

Those deals included the catalogs of Richie Sambora, Journey, Mark Ronson, Rodney Jerkins, Barry Manilow, Blondie, RZA, Nelly, Lindsey Buckingham, Neil Young, Rick James, Dave Stewart, The Chainsmokers, Teddy Geiger, The-Dream, Bernard Edwards, Christine McVie, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Carol Bayer Sager and Tricky Stewart.

Blackstone would ultimately acquire Hipgnosis Songs Fund in 2024 and combine it with the Hipgnosis Songs Capital portfolios under the name Recognition Music, with Mercuriadis bowing out of the picture.

Overlooked in the discussions triggered by the Sony acquisition, about which accounting valuations were correct then and now, is that the latest deal marks the second time that the assets traded hands without any legal complications.

In fact, these transactions used a swarm of legal teams to ensure all of the artists' contracts and acquisition deals carried clean titles of ownership and the proper letter of direction for royalty payments, among many other legal documents essential to such transactions. For example, the announcements of these deals credited these law firms: Kirkland & Ellis, Latham & Watkins, Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison, Simpson Thatcher & Bartlett, Loeb & Loeb and Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton.

The significance of this is that all of the original 100 or so catalogs acquired by Mercuriadis for Hipgnosis Songs Funds I were handled by a sole legal practitioner, Bill Leibowitz, whose firm goes by William R. Leibowitz Law Group. (Leibowitz worked in conjunction with Kirkland & Ellis on the 10 or so deals acquired for Hipgnosis Songs Capital.)

"This is very unusual as most music acquisition deals are done by law firms using teams of lawyers, since the process of performing legal due diligence and the negotiation and drafting of the purchase agreements on behalf of the party buying the music assets is arduous," Leibowitz says.

"I'm gratified to say that the quality of my contracts has been validated by the due diligence that Sony performed on them and by the extremely few contract issues that have arisen over the years," he adds.

In addition to the approximately 110 deals that he closed by Hipgnosis Songs Fund and Hipgnosis Songs Capital, Leibowitz says he was involved in the legal review of many more Hipgnosis acquisition deals that reached advanced stages but didn't close.

"Merck's deals all were for A-plus to B-plus assets, which involved a very arduous process with tough lawyers on the other side, endless negotiations and multiple drafts," he says. During this period, beginning in 2018, "it was a nonstop frenetic pace, working straight for seven years without any vacation. In retrospect, I should have asked Merck to hire four more lawyers." —ED CHRISTMAN

HARRY SCOTT DUBEL/GETTY IMAGES. LEIBOWITZ: TESS KAPLAN.

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Cardi B

Cardi B had a big year of victories, both on the charts and in the courtroom. This was due in no small part to the work of her longtime lawyers Moore and Pequignot, who run the Atlanta-based entertainment boutique law firm Moore Pequignot.

The firm shepherded Cardi through a high-profile assault trial, in which former security guard Emani Ellis claimed the star scratched her face during a 2018 altercation at a Los Angeles doctor's office. Cardi maintained that she never touched the guard, and her lawyers won a no-liability verdict in September that rejected the claim entirely.

The stakes were high for Cardi, since this trial coincided with the release of her much-anticipated sophomore album, *Am I the Drama?* But Cardi's team turned it around: The rapper released a special "courtroom edition" of what ultimately became a No. 1 album on the Billboard 200 and later scored a legal penalty against the attorney that brought the case.

Moore

Pequignot

"While the meme-worthy Ellis trial went viral and provided unending entertainment for many, this case clearly reflects that juries continue to be rightly skeptical and punishing of unfounded money grabs and that we need judges and courts to be more proactive weeding out patently frivolous cases," Moore says of the win.

Moore and Pequignot's work with Cardi over the last year didn't stop there. The firm also won a court order ending a copyright lawsuit that alleged Cardi's 2024 single "Enough (Miami)" copied an earlier track called "Greasy Frybread," with a Texas federal judge ruling in March that there was "no factual support" for these claims. And in May, they convinced a judge to punish gossip blogger Tasha K for violating a 2022 defamation settlement by continuing to post about Cardi's romantic relationships.

When they weren't busy repping Cardi, Moore and Pequignot helped convince a judge to dismiss an "inflammatory" lawsuit brought against Mary J. Blige by her former stylist Misa Hylton. The duo also maintains a robust transactional practice and closed numerous major (though confidential) film, TV, book publishing and licensing deals last year.

—R.S.

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It's been another banner year of intellectual property court battles for Pryor Cashman's music litigation group. Labels, publishers, artists and songwriters regularly call on this team to fight copyright infringement lawsuits over hit songs — and that's because they have a proven track record of winning.

Farkas

"We've done so many of these cases and so well that our clients trust us to handle them in a way that increases the chances for success," Farkas says. "They know that not only are we very competent and steeped in all the changing nuances of copyright law, but we're also very fluent in the music itself."

In 2025, Pryor Cashman secured litigation victories for all three of the major music groups (Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group and Sony Music Entertainment) in high-profile infringement actions. This included convincing judges to throw out copyright cases that alleged earlier songs had been copied in tracks like Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You," Karol G and Tiësto's "Don't Be Shy" and Anitta's "Funk Rave."

Fighting a lawsuit and winning in court is a major strength of Pryor Cashman's, but so is ascertaining when the more prudent and financially savvy path is a settlement. As Sammataro puts it, part of the team's expertise is "understanding the landscape and knowing when to press an issue and when not to press an issue."

This year at the negotiating table, Pryor Cashman inked a settlement that extricated Ty Dolla $ign from litigation over an uncleared sample on his Ye collaboration "Fuk Sumn," as well as a deal for Pitbull's label Mr. 305 Inc. to end song copying claims over the dance hit "I Feel Good." Sometimes the group is even able to convince a plaintiff to drop a lawsuit without any financial payout — as was the case this year for a copyright action over the Karol G song "Gatúbela," in which two producers publicly apologized after Sammataro showed them metadata confirming that the track was independently created.

"That is the best victory of all: convincing people that they have no claim, even though they came out of the gate like lions," Farkas says. "That's something that's very satisfying." –R.S.

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Matthew C. Thompson
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When Drake stunned the music industry by suing Universal Music Group over a rap beef, the label group turned to Rollin Ransom and Sidley Austin.

Ransom

Drake's case claimed that UMG had defamed him by releasing Kendrick Lamar's scathing diss track "Not Like Us," on which Lamar tarred his archrival as a "certified pedophile." Drake believed that millions of people took that lyric literally, severely harming his reputation.

UMG, represented by Ransom, didn't merely rebut those claims. In seeking to have the case dismissed, the company blasted the "meritless" lawsuit from its own artist as "no more than Drake's attempt to save face" after being publicly humiliated.

"Plaintiff, one of the most successful recording artists of all time, lost a rap battle that he provoked and in which he willingly participated," Ransom wrote at the time. "Instead of accepting the loss like the unbothered rap artist he often claims to be, he has sued his own record label in a misguided attempt to salve his wounds."

Those strong words came from a veteran music litigator who had previously represented UMG in a number of high-profile cases, including a major battle with recording artists over termination rights. He's currently repping the label in a long-running fight with Limp Bizkit and Fred Durst over royalties and recently won a $322 million judgment in a music piracy lawsuit against the pirate library Anna's Archive.

But it was the Drake case that drew the biggest headlines last year — an unprecedented legal battle pitting one of the most successful artists of his generation against his longtime record label over an exchange of diss tracks, sparking sharp debate over hip-hop culture and free speech.

In October, a judge sided with UMG and dismissed Drake's case, ruling that the rapper could not win a defamation case over such "hyperbolic" language in an exchange of diss tracks.

Drake is appealing the ruling — but Ransom is also representing UMG at the appeals court, where he has already had more strong words for the star's challenge: "Drake's view would critically undermine a highly creative art form." —B.D.

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Jose Juan Torres

MANAGING MEMBER

Bad Bunny onstage during halftime at Super Bowl LX.

Like many of his peers, entertainment lawyer Jose Juan Torres — whose prominent clients include superstars Bad Bunny and Rauw Alejandro — believes the most important legal issue facing the music industry today is the use of copyrighted works to train and operate generative artificial intelligence models.

Torres

"Beyond copyright, AI raises significant concerns," he says, citing issues such as "voice cloning and digital replicas, where an artist's voice is imitated without permission; rights of publicity; protecting an individual's name, image, likeness or distinctive identity; consumer confusion, where listeners may mistakenly believe an AI-generated song is an authentic recording by a particular artist; [and] contractual issues, as record labels and publishers negotiate AI-related rights in new agreements."

Not everything was about AI for Torres. In the last year, witnessing Puerto Rican musical genres such as *plena*, bomba and salsa transcend cultures, borders and languages has been a highlight for the longtime lawyer. The music is connecting people through shared emotions and experiences — including through Bad Bunny's performance at the 2026 Super Bowl halftime show and his current *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* world tour.

"Our artists and clients have taken these performances to audiences around the world, showcasing a musical heritage that is deeply rooted in passion, tradition and authenticity," says Torres, who has offices in Puerto Rico and New York. "Seeing a message of love and unity delivered through music during a moment as globally significant as the Super Bowl was something that far exceeded anything I ever imagined I would witness. It was an incredibly moving experience — not only from the perspective of an entertainment lawyer, but also as a lifelong music lover and, above all, as a proud Puerto Rican." —SIGAL RATNER-ARIAS

BAD BUNNY: KEVIN SABITUS/GETTY IMAGES. TORRES: COURTESY OF JOSE TORRES.

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Swift

VENABLE

J. Douglas Baldridge
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When you represent the biggest music star on earth, you need to be ready for anything.

J. Douglas Baldridge, a partner at the law firm law Venable, has served for years as a top attorney for Taylor Swift — a role that has seen him fend off copyright lawsuits, win an assault verdict against a DJ, protect against stalkers and, most recently, prevent her from getting dragged into a messy celebrity legal battle.

Baldridge

All that work comes with an added layer of difficulty: Lawyers to superstar clients must not only assess legal issues but also consider the PR angle of any move they make. Baldridge, who likely knows that better than anyone, says matters involving major artists can easily be "misunderstood" by the public in an era of social media and viral headlines.

"Every decision requires exacting focus not only on the legal strategy but also on how that strategy will be perceived," Baldridge says. "It calls for an arduous and challenging process to respect not only the law but also the expectations of those who are the foundation and support for the art itself, the fans. Neither can yield to the other."

He's not just Swift's lawyer, of course. Baldridge has handled more than 40 trials across a range of industries, including big antitrust cases. But his work for the star, which started in 2013, has unsurprisingly drawn the most headlines, starting with his 2017 trial win against a Denver radio DJ named David Mueller who Swift claimed groped her at a photo shoot.

After years as her outside counsel at Venable, Baldridge was hired as general counsel of Swift's 13 Management in 2023, serving in that in-house role during the final 18 months of her record-breaking The Eras Tour. In January 2025, he returned to the firm, where he has continued to represent the star.

There's hardly been a shortage of work. In May 2025, Swift signed a deal to buy back the masters to her first six studio albums, capping off a yearslong, highly public effort to take control of her own music. Baldridge also helped her win the dismissal of a copyright case, get a restraining order against a stalker and fight back against a trademark lawsuit over her album *The Life of a Showgirl*. He also spent months preventing her from getting subpoenaed and deposed in the ongoing fight between her friend Blake Lively and actor Justin Baldoni.

In April, Swift made more legal news when she applied for federal trademark registrations on her voice, a move that came amid growing concerns about AI and voice cloning. And you can't blame her: Two years ago, she was the victim of a high-profile flood of illegal AI-powered imagery on social media.

Asked about the most pressing legal issue for the music business, Baldridge says it's clearly AI: "I am sure it comes as no surprise to anyone that artificial intelligence continues to present the most important legal issues facing the music industry," he explains. "It is an absolute certainty that AI has changed and will continue to change how and by whom music is created. The question is, at what cost to human creativity?" —B.D.

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See story, page 116.

SWIFT: JOHN SHEARER/TAS24/GETTY IMAGES; BALDRIDGE: COURTESY OF VENABLE.

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In March, the U.S. Department of Justice settled with Live Nation a month into the company's blockbuster monopoly trial. Dozens of state attorneys general wanted to keep litigating the case through to a verdict, but they had a problem: Federal antitrust lawyers at the DOJ had been spearheading the litigation, and the states didn't have a lead trial counsel on hand to take over.

Kessler

Enter Jeffrey Kessler. A renowned competition attorney known for litigating antitrust cases against mega-organizations like the NFL and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Kessler was retained as rumors of a DOJ settlement began to swirl. He and his team from Winston & Strawn (recently renamed Winston Taylor following a merger with Taylor Wessing) had less than two weeks to get up to speed on the gigantic case file before resuming the Live Nation trial as lead counsel for the plaintiff states.

"It was incredibly challenging," Kessler says of the process, which required the team to sift through hundreds of pages of documents and prepare for dozens of witnesses. Before this, Kessler, like many of his peers, had been following the Live Nation case on a high level but hadn't been "steeped in the facts of the music industry," as he puts it.

Kessler ultimately secured a total victory for the states. The jury returned a verdict in April that found Live Nation liable on all counts, determining that the company used its combined power in ticketing, concert promotion and venue ownership to push out competition. Live Nation denies this.

"It was a great privilege to work with the states on this," Kessler says. "They are very dedicated to the enforcement of the antitrust laws. They are very fine lawyers, and I was and am proud to be part of their team on this case."

The work is not yet done for Kessler and his team. They remain busy in the post-trial phase of litigation, opposing Live Nation's motion for a new trial and urging a judge to force the sale of Ticketmaster as a remedy for monopolistic conduct. Live Nation has long maintained that a Ticketmaster divestiture order would be inappropriate and will almost certainly appeal any adverse ruling. —R.S.

KESSLER: COURTESY OF WINSTON TAYLOR. LIVE NATION: JONATHAN RAA/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES.

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ZIFFREN BRITTENHAM

John Branca
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It has been a milestone year for Michael Jackson's estate — and thus by extension for Ziffren Brittenham attorney John Branca, who has been the executor of Jackson's estate since his 2009 death.

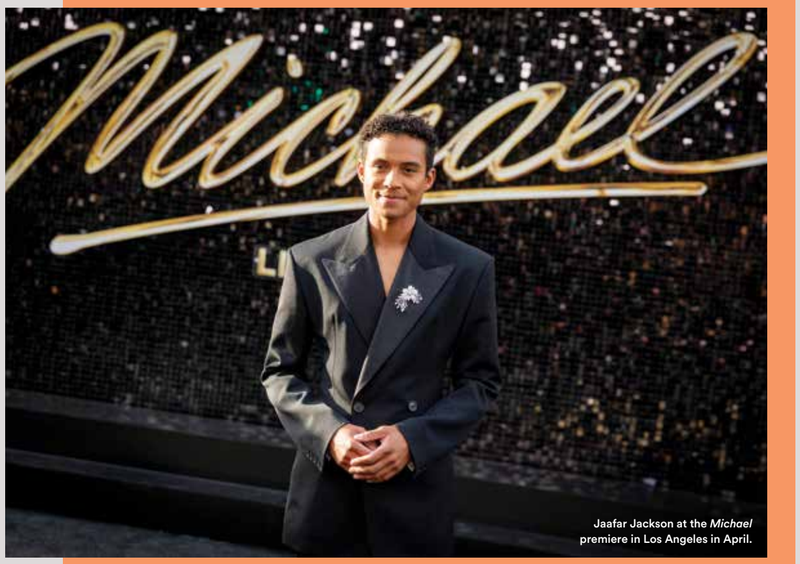
Following its April release, the long-awaited biopic *Michael*, starring Jackson's nephew Jaafar Jackson as the King of Pop, dethroned *Bohemian Rhapsody* to become the highest-grossing music biopic of all time. The movie's success drove a massive spike for Jackson's music. According to Luminate, his catalog registered 137.5 million on-demand streams in the week following the film's release — doubling his previous career high. In June, Jackson became the first and only artist to chart on the Billboard Hot 100 in every decade since the 1970s.

Branca

The clientele of music powerhouse Ziffren Brittenham extends far beyond the Jackson estate — in recent years, it has negotiated major tours and releases for SZA, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber and Shakira — but tending to Jackson's legacy has remained a key focus for Branca. The longtime Ziffren partner has helped steer the estate from the edge of bankruptcy while dogged by abuse allegations against Jackson to a booming multibillion-dollar business with stage productions, a huge catalog sale and now a smash-hit biopic.

The estate still faces its share of challenges. Branca has sparred in court with Jackson's mother and daughter, and the estate still faces several looming cases alleging abuse. But those issues have publicly been eclipsed by the soaring success of the film, in which Branca says the estate "set out to show the world the real Michael."

"I could not be more proud of what we accomplished," he says. "The response has been extraordinary, not just at the box office, but in the social media reaction and record worldwide streaming numbers. The worldwide love for Michael has been deeply moving." **–B.D.**



Jaafar Jackson at the *Michael* premiere in Los Angeles in April.

Contributors

Katie Bain, Anna Chan, Ed Christman, Hannah Dailey, Kyle Denis, Elizabeth Dilts Marshall, Bill Donahue, Thom Duffy, Chris Eggertsen, Paul Grein, Gil Kaufman, Joe Lynch, Taylor Mims, Jessica Nicholson, Sigal Ratner-Arias, Kristin Robinson, Michael Saponara, Rachel Scharf

Methodology

***Billboard*'s Top Music Lawyers recognizes only outside counsel at law firms with the exception of in-house attorneys at market-leading companies in the sectors shown. Nominations for all of *Billboard*'s industry-sourced executive lists open no less than 150 days in advance of publication, and a submission link is sent by request before the nomination period. (Email thom.duffy@billboard.com for inclusion on the email list for nomination links and for how to obtain an editorial calendar.) *Billboard*'s 2026 Top Music Lawyers were nominated by their firms and chosen by editors, based on factors including nomination information and the stature of their clients, as measured by *Billboard* charts, using data available as of Feb. 1. Other factors considered include previous inclusion on the Top Music Lawyers list and involvement in significant legal developments in the preceding year.**

BRANCA: JOSEPH FUQUA; JACKSON: EMMA MCINTYRE/WIREIMAGE

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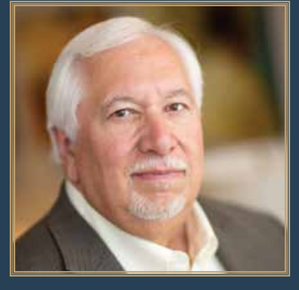

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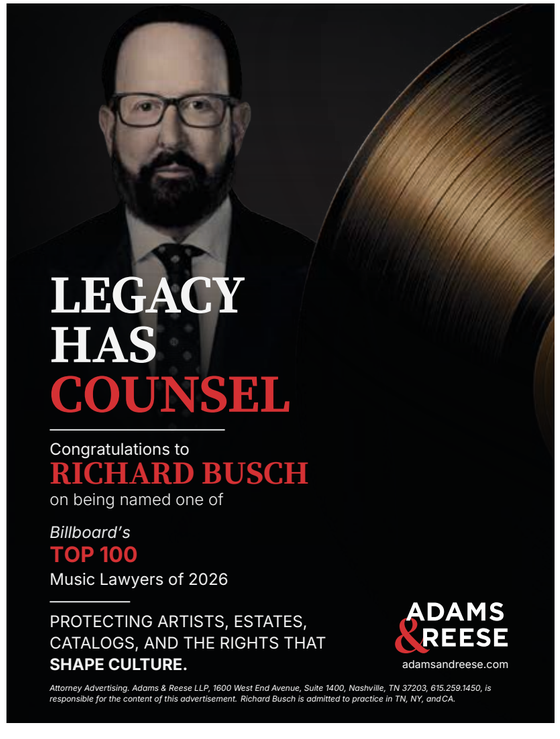
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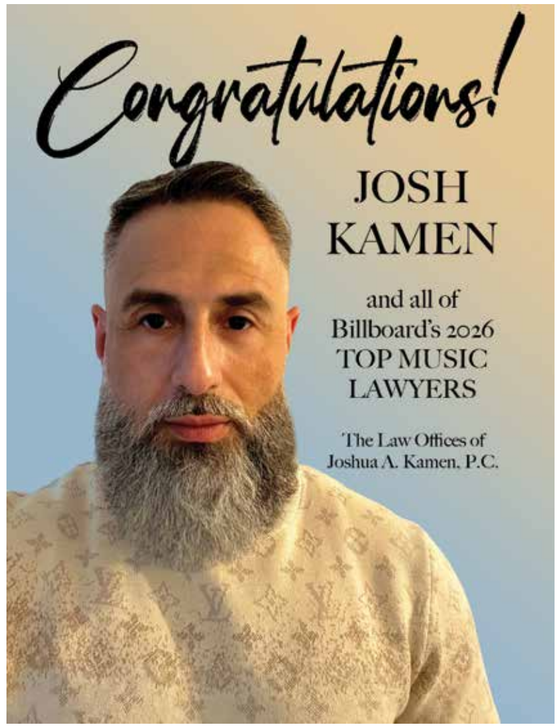

Willkie congratulates partners **Michael Gottlieb, Shane Nix, Beau Stapleton,** and **Alex Weingarten** for being named among ***Billboard's*** **2026 Top Music Lawyers**

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On August 1, *Billboard* will publish its annual 40 Under 40 Issue, celebrating the next generation of leaders in the music industry. This issue will profile 40 power players who are making their mark in the business.

These progressive young leaders' innovation and creativity will continue to create excitement in the music industry.

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ISSUE DATE 8/1 | **AD CLOSE** 7/21 | **MATERIALS DUE** 7/23

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2026

R&B / HIP-HOP POWER ISSUE

R&B/hip-hop dominates every other genre, claiming one-quarter of all music consumption, according to Luminate.

On Aug. 22, *Billboard* will publish its R&B/Hip-Hop Power Players issue showcasing the artists, producers and executives who have made R&B/hip-hop the hottest genre on earth.

Advertise and congratulate the people who are driving this industry and reach an influential audience of decision-makers in music and pop culture.

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ISSUE DATE 8/22 | **AD CLOSE** 8/11 | **MATERIALS DUE** 8/13

Mason photographed June 19 at The Greek Theatre in Los Angeles.

chartbreaker

No. 77

PEAK ON THE BILLBOARD HOT 100

VINCENT MASON

How "TruckTok" and angst powered the country singer's "Damned If I Do"

BY JESSICA NICHOLSON PHOTOGRAPHED BY AARON SINCLAIR

When Vincent Mason took the stage for the first show of his *There I Go* headlining tour in late January, the Kansas City crowd's response to "Damned If I Do" clued the country singer-songwriter in on the draw of his gritty, rock-oriented hit. "The way the room popped was really cool," he remembers. "I was like, 'Oh, shit. That's the song people are coming to hear.' "

Born and raised in Roswell, Ga., the 25-year-old grew up inspired by the music of John Mayer and, later, Parker McCollum. As a college student at Nashville's Lipscomb University, Mason began posting music to TikTok during the pandemic, and in early 2024, he fused his raw lyricism and country stylings into his acoustic-leaning ballad "Hell Is a Dance Floor." Three months after the song's independent release, thanks to its viral momentum from streaming and TikTok, Mason signed a record deal with Interscope Records/Music Soup and subsequently partnered with Universal Music Group Nashville/MCA (more recently, he's releasing music through Interscope imprint Lost Highway in partnership with Music Soup).

Two years after joining the label roster, Mason is now ascending with "Damned If I Do." The track debuted as his first Billboard Hot 100 hit in mid-May and has since reached a No. 77 high. He crafted the angsty breakout hit with its layers of guitar, bass and pedal steel at the start of 2025 alongside co-writers Lauren Hungate and Jacob Hackworth — and with a deepening interest behind the boards, Mason earned a co-producing credit, too.

"Damned If I Do" was officially released last July, but Mason first teased it weeks earlier on TikTok. According to Red Light Management's Matt Musacchio, who reached out in 2022 after discovering Mason in Apple Music's pop section, the song's initial growth was buoyed by "TruckTok," a TikTok community that allows truck and truck culture enthusiasts to share their passion through TikTok videos. "It's always interesting to see what kind of niche audience picks up audio and runs with it," Musacchio says. "We saw a lot of truck videos early on that used this audio — it's definitely on the angstier, rock side of what Vincent does, and that plays into the truck community, especially."

Last November, Mason released his debut album, *There I Go*, and embarked on several tours as an opening act. But when he launched his headlining tour, he says the January-May run of shows showed him the full potential of "Damned If I Do." "It is a hard-hitting, more uptempo rock moment in his set," Musacchio adds. "It's not a departure but shows a different side from a lot of his other material, and it feels like a great evolution from 'Hell Is a Dance Floor.' "

In May, Mason made his late-night TV debut on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and in June he released his love-struck collaboration "Something To Lose" with fellow country-leaning artist (and girlfriend) Stella Lefty, whose own country-courting single, "Boston," became her Hot 100 debut and has reached the top 15. "Something To Lose" scored both artists their second entry on the chart.

"Damned If I Do" went to country radio on July 13, and Mason and his team are "blocking out significantly more time" for making new music with the goal of being able to "go down different rabbit holes," he says. "I like the trajectory that we're on."

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