

# The A&R Equation



WOMEN ARE FINALLY RISING TO  
THE TOP OF THE RANKS. IT'S STILL AN  
UPHILL CLIMB BY TATIANA CIRISANO



**RIS LACY WAS** promoted in April 2019 to executive vp A&R at Warner Music Nashville, where

half of her six-person team are women. Her younger self wouldn't have believed it. When she started out in the male-dominated realm of the industry over two decades ago, "I felt like there was one spot in the A&R department for a female," she recalls. "Once that spot was filled, that was it."

While the music industry as a whole in recent years has made progress in addressing its long-standing gender disparities, many female executives say that A&R — the fiercely competitive artists and repertoire department responsible for signing and developing acts — has been the slowest to become more inclusive, due as much to lingering stereotypes about the role as to its cutthroat nature. While comprehensive statistics on gender in the music industry workforce are still sorely lacking, women comprise only 18% of the more than 1,800 A&R roles worldwide that were included in the most recent edition of the industry's *A&R Registry* — despite the fact that roughly half of music consumers are women, according to the RIAA.

For years, many women did not even consider a career in A&R. Lanre Gaba, Atlantic Records' GM/senior vp A&R for Black music, initially had little interest in the field, "maybe because I didn't see a lot of other women doing it," and started her career as a publishing coordinator before scoring an entry-level A&R job at Atlantic 18 years ago. The expected lifestyle of "going to the strip club and being part of the boys club" deterred more women from trying A&R, she thinks. "There was this caricature for an A&R person that I thought I had to emulate" of someone "up all night, drinking, hanging."

Of the eight women interviewed for this story — ranging in age from 25 to 55 and working for both major and independent labels in a variety of genres — many say having a "tomboy" personality is what helped them get ahead.

Even after scoring an A&R position, these women say they've often felt their opinions are discounted. "I don't think everyone was looking at me like, 'She's a girl, ignore her,'" says Lacy of her early days on the job, "but in a room of people who were all males who all had the same lens, I was outnumbered." That gender imbalance has no doubt influenced music released over the years; several interviewees recount watching their male colleagues make lyrical decisions based on their perceived notions of what women want to hear while disregarding input from the actual women in the room. "I remember one particular conversation about, 'Oh, women like to be called this and that,'" says Gaba. "It's funny how [men] will try and fight you on that."

That's starting to change. Some artists and executives specifically seek out female A&R executives. "The artists themselves are starting to feel like there's really no variety" in songs, says Sony Music U.S. Latin director of A&R and premium content Isabel De Jesús. "We're talking about the same things and everything is getting repetitive. And then they look for diversity" in their team members. Pulse Music Group senior vp/head of creative Ashley Calhoun reasons that "women tend to be more nurturing and have a lot of patience" — both great qualities in an A&R executive — and says that's why creators like singer-producer Brent Faiyaz now "prefer to work with women." In turn, plenty of female A&R executives make a point of supporting female creators. At Atlantic, Gaba seeks out female artists who "have something



Members of Big Machine Label Group's A&R team, from left: Carly Strickland, Brown Jones and Darielle Schroeder.

to say, are completely themselves and define what it is to be a feminist on their own terms" — which led her to develop Lizzo and Cardi B.

As A&R has evolved, so have its methods — from analyzing data to scouting talent on social media — opening up paths for women with diverse skill sets. And though the coronavirus pandemic has made the in-person events normally crucial to A&R impossible, it has also inspired women to pivot in creative ways: GLAD EMPIRE founder/CEO Camille Soto Malave says she has started following social media hashtags and accounts focused on unsigned artists, keeping an eye out for impressive freestyles. "We have Zoom, we have DocuSign," she says. "Why put anything on pause?"

It has now been nearly 15 years since the days when no woman ran a mainstream A&R department at any major record label. Still, the sector is far from reaching gender parity, and historic issues — from capping women's advancement at junior positions to microaggressions in the office — persist. Even as the A&R lifestyle has evolved far beyond its up-all-night reputation, some women say the industry can still be prejudiced against working mothers. Epic Records vp A&R Jenn Goicoechea delivered longtime client 21 Savage's *Savage Mode II* in September within 48 hours of giving birth to her first child — but now, she says, some colleagues assume she's unable to hit the studio or answer the phone past 8 p.m.

"You're assuming that I'm down and out, and I don't need people to make assumptions for me," she says. Allison Brown Jones, who was promoted to Big Machine Label Group executive vp A&R in September, remembers hearing Atlantic Records chairman/COO Julie Greenwald speak about motherhood after she was named *Billboard's* Women in Music Executive of the Year and thinking, for the first time, "Oh, my gosh, it's OK to admit that I have a kid."

Brown Jones — who led an all-female team for eight years — is among many women A&R executives who largely credit their success to mentorship from other women. And Motown Records president/Capitol Music Group executive vp Ethiopia Habtemariam says that the new class of female A&R chiefs must take up that task in order to bring about sustained progress. "If you see a young assistant with interest in A&R, include them in the meeting," she says. "We're seeing change actually happen, but it's up to us to make sure it's not a moment."

Goicoechea, who began her career as Ciara's assistant and was later mentored by Epic Records chairman/CEO Sylvia Rhone, says that her phone "is always on" for calls and texts — and for many women in the field, that kind of support can make all the difference. "I just figured I was alone in this," recalls Lacy. "Now, women think, 'There's room for me' — and they're showing up and beating out the competition."