

A&R Insider: Shane Barrett; Senior Manager of A&R, MCA Records Nashville

Guest Column

brought to you by  **Taxi**

Interviewed by Michael Laskow

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio.

At what age did you know that you wanted to be in the music business?

I think it was around the age of twelve. I took up the guitar, and at the time I had a step dad who was a guitar player. He was really instrumental in teaching me and furthering me along.

Were you listening to Country then?

No, at that age--which was around the turn of the 80's -- I was just starting to get into Journey, and later Def Leppard, and bands like that. I've also always been a huge Beatles and Eagles fan. I discovered Hotel California on 8-track when I was seven years old, and I haven't let go of it since.

At twelve years old, did you want to be a rock star, or did you want to be a record company guy?

My high school counselor in Cincinnati discovered I had put "Rock Musician" on a vocational interest survey. He called me to his office and told me about the music business program at Belmont College in Nashville. That following summer, my mom and I ended up coming to Nashville. We loved Nashville and Belmont. Right as we were about to leave to go back home, realizing it was much too expensive, the Belmont guy said, "Wait a minute. There is one other option." He told my mother that if she got a job at Belmont that after a year of residency and her working there, I could go to school for free. So we did it. We moved to Nashville for my junior and senior year of high school. She started working at Belmont, and I started in the fall of 1987 and haven't stopped since. Wherever that counselor is, I owe a lot to him. That's what brought me here.

Not to mention your mom!

Exactly. Part two of this amazing story is that my mom, who at that time had only a couple of college courses under her belt, is going to be getting her doctorate this coming May. She still works at Belmont and has been taking classes along the way.

What was your first gig in the business and how did you get it?

The internships I did in college were priceless. I worked with (producer) Barry Beckett, for a year and a half. I also worked at Sony, in the publicity department.

Then right out of college, I got a job playing acoustic guitar and singing backup vocals for Lacy J. Dalton. I finally landed at the mailroom at MCA for two and a half years. During that time, the marketing and promotion departments found out that I played guitar. They enlisted me to play on the side with some of our artists at the time. They would find a temporary worker to come in and take my place in the mailroom. I flew around everywhere. It was great. I think all that got the attention of Tony Brown (former MCA Nashville President - ed.), who brought me into A&R in 1996.

A&R Insider: Shane Barrett; Senior Manager of A&R, MCA Records Nashville

Now that you're an A&R guy, what percentage of your time do you spend looking for tunes versus looking for new artists?

I would say it's really split evenly. I'm always thinking of both. Sometimes you see an act, and although you don't believe the act fits in with your roster, you might hear some of those songs for your existing artists. Or sometimes you just like the artist, and you tell them you'd like to hear them sing some different songs. I try to go out and see as much as I can in local clubs or wherever. People bring material in to me to listen to in my office. I try to see if anything works for us, whether it be the songs, or the artist's potential, or whatever.

How many artists do you have on the roster?

It's about 13 or 14 right now.

Looking for new acts is very different in Nashville than it is in L.A. or New York. An A&R guy from L.A. or New York might get on a plane a few times a month to go to other towns and look at talent. But it seems that you guys stay here. Is it true that if you want to make it in Country music, you have to come to Nashville?

Since I've been doing A&R, I've probably traveled to see an act maybe two or three times. And that's it. Otherwise it's been here. Actually my first signing was Shannon Lawson and that fell right into my lap here in Nashville.

How did that happen?

Shannon's wife, Mandy Lawson, is a song plugger and we had had a listening relationship for about two years. Finally she started mentioning her husband. She was real low-key about it, but it piqued my interest.

He signed his first publishing deal in May of 2000 with Extreme Writers Group, and they did their first session. I ended up hearing one song from that session, and I begged and pleaded to get the whole session on CD. They

A&R Insider: Shane Barrett; Senior Manager of A&R, MCA Records Nashville

reluctantly did that, while at the same time asking me not to play it for anybody because they wanted to at least have another session to get enough songs to pick from for the official artist package presentation.

So I agreed, and they got me the whole session. Of course I freaked out about it. Contrary to what they asked me, I had to run down the hall and play it for Tony Brown--which they ended up thanking me for later!

Shannon's first single is out right now and it's doing well. It's called "Goodbye On A Bad Day." Mark Wright produced his debut album, which will be released on June 4th, 2002.

When an artist finally gets their package together in Nashville, does everybody in town get it? Does a music attorney or someone run it around to everybody in a two-week period, and everybody starts buzzing about the artist and it becomes a bidding war? That's typical of L.A. and New York. Or is it more singular, as in the story you just described about Shannon?

I think it has to do with timing. With Shannon, I just was lucky enough to discover this thing seconds before everybody else got it. That was very fortunate for me because it very well could have ended up being a bidding war had I sat on it for a couple of weeks. But instead, I ran it right in to Tony because I just instantly believed in it and it paid off.

Usually a lawyer, or a manager, or whoever the representative is might pick just a small handful of their close contacts to go to first. Then it will be a broader presentation if that artist isn't immediately snatched up.

It's the "good old boys" network in a good way. The manager or lawyer is trying to give first crack to the people he likes best.

Yeah, it's all about relationships, especially here in Nashville. A lot of times people will opt to do a showcase and just invite all of Music Row. That can be good or bad. You can either get some interest from that, or if it's not the right presentation or not the right artist, you can instantly turn everybody off with a half hour show. Sometimes it's that moment of truth where their representative, or whoever puts the money behind that show realizes, "oops, this was a mistake." And then it's back to square one.

Is it a myth or is it truth that a fair number of artists in Nashville get signed because they are demo singers?

I think that has worked in a few cases. I think some demo singers have gotten signed only to be dropped later because they were, in fact, demo singers and not really artists. There are a lot of variables in the success of an artist, but a great voice isn't going to do it anymore. You have to have the whole thing, and I think everybody knows that.

What is "the whole thing"?

There are two ways to look at it. I think that some labels and some A&R people might take what is happening at radio right now and expand on it and say, "Okay, that's working,. Let's try to give radio more of this."

I learned from one of the greats, Tony Brown, who stepped out on a limb every time to sign greatness, whether he knew it was going to work for radio or not. That wasn't ever a given. He just signed it because he knew it was great, but radio isn't always going to latch onto it.

I would rather sign a great artist every time and have a struggle at radio because you know it's great music and needs to be heard. It just may be a new way of thinking or a new direction.

You know the story with Garth Brooks. Supposedly, he was turned down by every label in town once or twice until Capitol finally got it. Not everybody is going to get it right away, and that includes radio. But that doesn't mean it shouldn't be sent to them.

Is radio more receptive right now because Country music is in a little bit of a slump? It seems as though the Country music industry is looking for the next thing, which I always see as a promising thing, because it means anything can happen. Is there any truth to that? Two years ago it seemed people were embracing Pop, but at the same time leery of how far things had swung in that direction. Then the success of O Brother Where Art Thou was maybe the first flag to go up to indicate that people do still like tradition.

I think we have a real opportunity here. Thank goodness for O Brother to have come along and have the awards and the sales that it has. It does make people think twice about what the people want to hear.

We have a real opportunity to give the people great music and to sign great artists and to get away from the song-driven atmosphere that we're living in right now. Hopefully we can get back to more of an artist-driven community with artists that can go on for years and years to have great careers like they used to.

On a typical album, can you ballpark a guess at how many songs might get listened to in total by you, the producer, the manager, the artist or whoever before you narrow it down to the ones that get cut?

Wow, that's hard to say. I would say over 500, definitely. You do have several people such as the producer, the artist, a couple of A&R people, managers nowadays, listening to a lot of different songs. If you add all of that up, you'd be surprised at the number of songs that are listened to for one project. It's a narrowing-down process that takes several months. It's got to be in the hundreds upon hundreds.

Of the songs that eventually get cut, do you pare it down even more? For instance, do say 20 songs get recorded and then narrowed down to maybe twelve that make it on the record?

That depends, because you may have a George Strait, and they pick ten songs that they are going to cut, and that's the ten. You can pretty much count on it in most cases. Whereas somebody like, say Trisha Yearwood or some other acts will definitely over-cut. It may not be as high as 20, but somewhere between ten and 20. You may end up having some songs that you've over-cut that you love that don't make the current project, but may end up making it on the next project. I think it's a good idea to cut extra songs, unless you're somebody like George who absolutely knows the ten songs he wants to be on there. I think in most cases it's good to have some choices.

I know it's preferable if you find an artist that looks great, sounds great, and writes great songs. You'd hit pay dirt in that case. But so many of the artists that get signed don't write. What is it that you would need to see in them that would cause you to sign an artist that doesn't write?

I think the stakes are much higher when you sign an artist that doesn't write their own material because you really have a challenge. You have to figure out who they are by other people's songs. And they have to figure that out, too. Whereas if you bring in a singer-songwriter, whether the songs they write are great or not, those songs define the artist for better or worse. So the best case scenario is that the songs they write are going to be great and you can play them outside songs too to try to supplement it.

In the case of Shannon Lawson, he wrote or co-wrote ten out of the 11 that ended up making the album. So we did hit pay dirt with Shannon. He is a great writer, and he's going to become a better writer, which is very exciting. Most of the people that I gravitate towards are singer-songwriters. It seems like a lot of the people that are coming out now do happen to write their own material. Whether it be a case where they write a lot of stuff that ends up making it on the album, that may or may not happen, but they are writers.

That must be a tough situation if you have an artist who is a writer, and between the producer and the A&R person they eliminate some of their babies from the record and supplant it with material from pro writers.

Yeah, it's a very diplomatic process, and I have to credit Tony Brown, my former boss, and Mark Wright, my current boss, who are masters at that. It's not trying to influence an artist to cut outside material because they think that the songs that the artist writes are no good. It's not about that at all.

It's just about what is going to be the greater good for everybody. It's what is going to give us the most album sales, and what's going to be the most appealing to radio. We have to have a few hits in there that are guaranteed smashes. You've got to have that. But at the same time, the artist's integrity has to be intact. You can't expect them to totally compromise and cut things they don't want to cut and expect them to be a happy artist.

There has to be a compromise. I heard a Dixie Chicks story where for that first album, they ended up cutting one song that they wanted to cut, but that the producers didn't necessarily feel was right. And then they did just the opposite too. And then they both were hits, so it was a win-win.

Has the demographic of Country listeners and Country radio fans shifted a lot? Is that why the industry went so far to Pop, or is it all Shania Twain's fault? Is the younger audience demanding, "I don't want to listen to my father's Country?"

Yeah, the demographic for radio as I've heard it recently is the 35-year old female, which is an interesting demographic. I think for us to be successful in the future, we have to broaden our demographic. We have to bring male listeners back. We have to bring young and older listeners back. I think diversity is the key.

I think people don't just want Pop/Country. People still seem to love a well-turned phrase and a well-written song.

That's why I say diversity is the key. They should play some of the older artists. I'm noticing that this duet with Willie Nelson and LeAnn Womack is climbing the charts, and I think that's great. Combine the older with the new and make great things happen. I think we have some really credible aging artists that still have a lot to say. I think it's interesting that we don't have more career artists these days. I know they are out there, but they may not be getting through the clutter of artists.

Where do you think it's all going? What's the five-year plan for the Country music industry do you think?

Well after I take control of everything... [laughs] but that may be just slightly beyond five years! I really want to watch this trend that I'm seeing of the singer-songwriter coming back. Those acts that we remember and loved from the 70's--the Eagles and James Taylor who are my favorites from that era--personally I'm trying to bring that back around because I just think that nobody can tell a story the way the person who wrote the song can.

If your little sister called you up today and said, Shane, I want to be in the music business. What would your advice be?

My best advice would be to follow your heart because these days there are so many avenues for using musical talent or just in the music business itself, there are so many roads you can take.

Along the way you're going to get a lot of naysayers. I got that when I was growing up--people that said: "you need a backup plan" and "it's a hard way to go" and "very few people find success." I think my passion led the

A&R Insider: Shane Barrett; Senior Manager of A&R, MCA Records Nashville

way and I was able to take their advice, but at the same time follow my heart. This is where I ended up and I'm very happy. I'm glad I didn't compromise. I'm glad I didn't take that job that somebody suggested I do rather than the music business because it was more of a sure thing. There are very few sure things in the music industry, but I think that's one of the things that draws creative people to it. It's sort of a mystery.

Brought to you by TAXI: The Independent A&R Vehicle that connects unsigned artists, bands and songwriters with major record labels, publishers, and film & TV music supervisors.

[Click Here for more helpful articles.](#)