

WHO'S WHO IN A&R AT ISLAND



CHRIS BLACKWELL — Island Records



MARSHALL BLONSTEIN — President — Island Records



LIONEL CONWAY — V.P. of A&R — Island Records/
President — Island Music

ARTIST ROSTER

Bob Marley & The Wailers
Third World
Robert Palmer
Gibson Brothers

Grace Jones
The Buggles
Jess Roden
Runner

Marianne Faithful
High Tension
John Martyn
Steve Winwood

INTERVIEW WITH LIONEL CONWAY

Q: How does A&R work at Island, who does what?

A: Basically, it's Chris Blackwell and myself in the States, with input from Allan McDougall, my General Manager at Island, and obviously Marshall Blonstein as President of Island Records receives a lot of calls and tapes. However, the company is primarily English-based, and those American acts that we have signed are unfortunately no longer with us.

Q: Why is that?

A: There were so many changes at distribution and personnel levels, we never could follow through. Maybe they would have had a better shot had they been with us now. I feel that we have a much stronger team and of course the backing of Warner Brothers.

Q: Are you thinking of signing more U.S. acts?

A: We will do . . . in fact we've already signed one. They're in the studio now with producer Jeff Porcaro. We haven't got a name for them yet but it's sort of "new wave" in direction, and the album will be released early next year.

Q: I couldn't help but notice that quite a few of the first "new wave" acts were on Island Records. How has that evolved?

A: Yes, I think we were the first company to release "new wave" product. We had Ultravox and Eddie and the Hot Rods, but unfortunately we couldn't break these acts outside the U.K. And being a company that thinks internationally, we had to drop them. That doesn't mean we are closing the door on "new wave". In fact it's just the opposite. I think we have two of the most creative new bands to come out of England this year. They are the Jags whose first single made the top 20 in the U.K., and the Buggles whose first record is number 1 in the U.K. We are releasing both singles in America this week.

Q: It's interesting how big reggae is in England and yet it doesn't seem to break here in its pure form.

A: Well, I don't think it will be big here. It's alien to Black America's taste, both melodically and lyrically. In fact if you go to a Bob Marley concert here, 70% of the audience is white, usually college students. It's appreciated by a minority and I don't think we're going to get those Platinum records sales in reggae, except perhaps with Marley because he is a superstar. I don't think we'll see a reggae revolution.

Q: How do you find a product, is it through lawyers and established lines of communications?

A: The act that we signed in America that I mentioned earlier came through a lawyer and friend named Eric Eisner. But usually we don't necessarily work through lawyers, but from tips. It's easier in England because it's an instant business there. You get "hot" in two or three gigs and the whole industry knows about you, whereas here it takes a bit longer. I like that instant recognition in England. It's easy to work with . . . you know your competitors within a week.

Q: Do you find it easier to make deals outside of the States?

A: It hasn't become as sophisticated in England as it has in the States because it's only been a big business in England for the last few years. There are a few American type lawyers there now, however, and I think it's only a matter of time.

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- Q:** What about lawyers gradually becoming managers as they do so often in the U.S.?
- A:** It's against the British legal ethics to do both, however I do know a lot of lawyers in England who have been offered management. In fact one such lawyer left his legal firm to become a manager.
- Q:** Usually there are definite lines drawn between music publishing and a record company and yet you do both. How does that work out?
- A:** When I go for an act, it's usually for publishing. If it's available then I might do an independent production through Island Music and offer it around. Or I just might play it for Chris. At least with Chris it's an instant yes or no. Island has a certain image and there are good acts that just aren't suitable or appropriate for Island Records, so I would place them elsewhere.
- Q:** What is "Island's image" as you see it?
- A:** Island should be ahead of its time . . . it always has been. Each act should be unique, the best in its field, like Marley or Marianne Faithfull, whose new album will just astound people, or Stevie Winwood, or Robert Palmer.
- Q:** Aren't you taking a bigger financial risk that way?
- A:** Yes. We have artists like John Martyn who have had 9 or 10 albums released with virtually no commercial success but eventually John Martyn will happen . . . at least we hope so. Jess Roden is a great singer that the world hasn't even heard about, yet he's made 9 or 10 albums with us . . . we believe Jess Roden is a talent, and talent will always win in the end.
- Q:** To get back to your publishing operation, what are some of the projects that you did publishing and production on, and then placed on other labels?
- A:** The McCrarys are with Portrait/Epic. I did a lot of deals in England. My first there was a group on Warner Brothers called Curved Air which did very well . . . I've had acts on Atlantic, EMI and others.
- Q:** Island Records has a relatively small roster, do you make a conscious effort to stay within a certain number of acts?
- A:** No we don't. Chris really decides. If we said there should be only three acts signed this year and Chris signs another ten, then that's his prerogative.
- Q:** Lionel, you live here in the States, what do you feel is the musical future here?
- A:** I think there's another English invasion on the way . . . I go to clubs and hear a lot of British music. Promoters are telling me that they have more public response for a concert by a British band than their American counterpart.
- Q:** Why is that?
- A:** Because it's raw . . . America is too sophisticated . . . it's gotta "get down."
- Q:** Do you think it's a reaction to disco as well?
- A:** Yes, it's fighting disco in England and I think it's gonna fight it here. You see it already, discos are not only playing Chic but also introducing British rock as well . . . like M, Nick Lowe, Joe Jackson, and watch our record "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles.
- Q:** What about unsolicited tapes, what happens to them at Island?
- A:** They come in and they go out . . . In all the years that I've been in the music industry, I've never found a tape that I followed up on for a record deal.
- Q:** Never?
- A:** Never, ever . . . and that's over twenty years. Now I listen to maybe eight or sixteen bars and that's it. Keep in mind that I listen to tapes that come in for publishing as well as record company business.
- Q:** Do you listen to all of the tapes yourself?
- A:** No, Allan McDougall also hears a lot of them.
- Q:** Perhaps we should clarify something here. I presume when you said that you have never found an act through unsolicited tapes, that you were talking in your capacity as A&R for the record company, where you most probably have in fact found material when listening to tapes in your capacity as director of publishing?
- A:** I listen to tapes both for Records and Publishing.
- Q:** Since you are a relatively substantial company in the U.K. and a relatively small company here, are there any plans to expand the American operation?
- A:** No, there's no plan for expansion. Warner Brothers is really in control here. We don't give them a great deal of product and if we do grow, it will be done very carefully and very slowly. Each act we do here will be worked long term. It's happening now for Marley, Robert Palmer and Grace Jones and our next big project will be Marianne Faithfull.
- Q:** So you are not actively looking to sign more American acts?
- A:** Slowly. Once our name is better known in the States it will be different. In England, Island has a reputation as an innovator and it is one of those companies where you know that everything released on that label has a certain quality about it. We haven't got that image here yet, except perhaps on college campuses. Now we must reach the rest of the public awareness, and we're doing it, gradually.

PUBLISHERS

&

A&R DIRECTORS

USE

new on the charts

TO FIND

PRODUCERS

&

MANAGERS