

DOWNTOWN MUSIC PUBLISHING

New Kid In Town

BY JOHN CONNOR COULSTON

Nashville is filled with long-standing institutions in the songwriting/publishing industry, but there's a relatively new player in town shaking things up: Downtown Music Publishing.

Downtown was founded in 2007 by CEO Justin Kalifowitz in an attempt to inject the industry with technological foresight and a more personal touch to publishing. Since then, the company has racked up a catalog of 100,000 songs that they manage, with songwriters John Lennon & Yoko Ono, One Direction, Hans Zimmer, The Kinks' Ray Davies, Mötley Crüe's Nikki Sixx, and Santigold on their roster.

They began with an office in New York City but soon expanded across the U.S. (Los Angeles, Nashville) and the rest of the globe (London, Tokyo, Amsterdam). As the company grew, a Nashville office was an essential piece on their path to become one of the top-tier publishing firms in the business. Music City held a treasure trove of songwriters looking to capitalize on their established successes and make their marks worldwide.

"Nashville is the most important songwriting community in the world," Downtown COO Andrew Bergman says. "Given our aspirations as a publisher, it was imperative for us to have a strong presence in Nashville that reflects our values as a company and that is an active member of such a dynamic community."

With Downtown set on expanding to Nashville in 2014, the company's execs knew they needed a local heavyweight with a reputation to establish themselves in one of the music industry's key cities. Enter Steve Markland, the company's Vice President of A&R and leader of the Nashville team.

Markland is a publishing veteran whose Nashville connections run all the way back to his time at Belmont University and interning

at RCA Records' local office. Since those beginnings more than a quarter of a century ago, Markland went on to Warner/Chappell Music, Windswept Publishing and Patrick Joseph Music. At Warner/Chappell, Markland worked with some exciting young stars in the country world, such as Kacey Musgraves, the Brothers Osborne and A Thousand Horses.

From that stint at Warner Music Group's publishing arm, Markland made the jump to Downtown, excited to work in a more hands-on environment.

This new environment allowed him to zero in on developing songwriters and artists in Downtown's stable, especially those with the "hunger" for success such as fast-riser Jillian Jacqueline, veteran writer Mark Beeson and hitmaker Kelly Archer.

"With writers, you're obviously looking for people who have a unique and great talent," Markland says. "You find that person who is hungry and talented and they have that attitude of 'I'm going to stop at nothing.' The people who work super hard and have a great work ethic ... A partner writer that wants to get in the trenches with you and make stuff happen ... that's the kind of people I want to surround myself with."

He adds, "I just have to find something that really flips my switch ... the kind of artists that I just can't deny or ever say no to."

Among those switch-flipping artists are Americana all-stars Jason Isbell, Sturgill Simpson and John Moreland, who have all partnered with Downtown. The Downtown execs credit those relationships to the hard work by the dedicated Nashville team, who in turn boost artists' imprints by utilizing the company's connections around the world.

"I think those types of artists have been super drawn to Downtown, from a great administrative space to also a sync team that can get stuff out there and get quality placement," Markland says. "Representing our songs and our writers is our major focus."

Bergman adds, "We have a great local team that is committed to the traditional country



Steve Markland, Downtown Music Publishing VP of A & R.

market but they also work on a daily basis with our global team to develop opportunities for our writers in other markets."

External growth is a key aspect of the publishing business, but internal development is also vital for the Downtown model. Writers within the publisher's stable are encouraged to collaborate with fellow affiliated writers, regardless of genre, either in other branches or in their own backyard.

"All of our writers tend to work together to a certain degree," Markland says. "Not always, but there's a healthy balance of writing together and working together and sharing their skill sets and styles. We've had writers work together, and it's fantastic. There's a real sense of comradery."

He continues, "I love writers that want to come in the building and work in the writer rooms that we set up. There's a really good songwriter atmosphere. We've worked really hard at making it a comfortable space for writers to want to be around."

As for advice he lends to songwriters looking to find a publishing house, Markland says to look for a company that is going to do more than simply cut you a check and hope for the best.

"I think the main thing you want to find is the person who most gets what you do and that can really help you," Markland says. "Don't sign anywhere for the money. Hopefully you'll get an advance to help you survive and won't have to work three jobs at once, but make a decision that's good for your career, not your bank account. Make sure you sign with someone who really gets what you do and can get out there and champion your cause and get behind you and make a real difference in your career." ★

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