

Agents

Tearing Down the Silo

BY HOLLY GLEASON

When Nashville blew up, becoming the “it” city almost overnight, growth was exponential. The tourists flocked to Lower Broadway to drink and drown in honky-tonks, and the music business realized that country music, siloed at a central location, was a missed opportunity.

Suddenly, the major labels, publishers and even promoters were opening outposts devoted to *all* music, not just country. Nowhere is the genre-blending more pronounced than at the major agencies. Whether Creative Artists Agency, Wasserman, William Morris Endeavor, UTA or even the independent The Neal Agency, home to genre bender Morgan Wallen, the focus is on innovative ways to tour, build an audience and otherwise identify opportunities for clients.

For Wasserman’s Keith Levy, who brought Tyler Childers, Caamp and Sierra Ferrell to a mass audience; CAA’s Hunter Williams, agent for

Jelly Roll and an architect of the agency’s EDM roster; UTA co-Head of Global Talent Jeffrey Hasson (Tyler Hubbard, Brittny Spencer, Young the Giant, The Pretty Reckless); and WME’s Braeden Rountree (Kane Brown, Zach Bryan, Ryan Hurd, Marcus King Band), a wide-open outlook means that what would’ve been unthinkable even five years ago in terms of gigs, tours and alliances doesn’t seem so crazy today. Factor in third-generation agent Austin Neal, who left WME with Wallen and recruited HARDY, ERNEST and Riley Green, and what goes on in Music City is less genre-bound than ever.

“We’re definitely seeing a blurring of the lines,” confirms CAA’s Williams. “A great example is Jelly Roll’s upcoming tour; we wanted to embrace as many genres as possible and keep it interesting from the minute the show starts and play off



“The blending of genres creates interesting opportunities for crossover touring. HARDY, for one, has played rock and metal festivals in the U.S. That’s natural and authentic to him, and the fans can sense it.”

—The Neal Agency’s Austin Neal

Austin Neal (left); with Morgan Wallen



“Because people want authenticity these days, artists must be true to themselves in what inspires them to create; if they want to bring heavy metal or pop influences into their music or collaborate with an artist in another genre, they should do it.” —WME’s Braeden Rountree

Braeden Rountree (left); with Zach Bryan

the genres that have influenced Jelly. We have everyone from **Three 6 Mafia** and **Elle King** to **Yelawolf** and **Ashley McBryde** supporting. We also added comedian **Josh Adam Meyers** to spice it up.”

Says WME’s Rountree, “This has been a natural progression because you’re seeing acts like Jelly Roll and HARDY have #1s at Country radio and Rock radio almost simultaneously. That makes it easier to mix things up with packaging. And because people want authenticity these days, artists must be true to themselves in what inspires them to create; if they want to bring heavy metal or pop influences into their music or collaborate with an artist in another genre, they should do it.

“Certain artists who are generally considered country acts are getting really popular, to where mainstream/non-country-leaning festivals are incorporating them into their lineups; Lollapalooza, Coachella, BottleRock, Hangout and Jazz Fest have had acts like **Chris Stapleton**, **Eric Church**, **Luke Combs** and **Kane Brown**.”

UTA’s Hasson concurs, remarking, “Artists are influenced by many types of music as they find themselves creatively. We’ve had **Maren Morris** tour with **Kingfish** and **Reba** with **Brandi Carlile**, to name just two examples. My roster spans genres, and I believe in taking principles and lessons from each to benefit all, which in turn perpetuates any tendency an artist has toward genre-bending.”

Wasserman’s Levy thinks the blurred lines may also result from the means of exposure. “Certain artists who fit outside the prior norms or

center of a particular genre are less reliant on gatekeepers like radio, labels, etc.,” he points out. “The audience now tells us what they care about. This is a beautiful thing. It means artists like **Tyler Childers** can tour sheds and arenas and headline major festivals.”

Neal sees it as evolution. “Past collaborations felt forced as the industry chased pop-crossover hits,” he says. “Now the mainstream has come to country, and songs like [Wallen’s] ‘Last Night’ and [Combs’] ‘Fast Car’ are seeing success without that force. The blending of genres creates interesting opportunities for crossover touring. HARDY, for one, has played rock and metal festivals in the U.S. That’s natural and authentic to him, and the fans can sense it.”

These veteran agents all cited affordability, proximity to work/ease of commute and a location central to most of the U.S. as strong positives for basing tours in Nashville instead of on the coasts.

Now that the silo traditionally housing country music is being torn down, the concern of non-country artists based in Nashville that they will find themselves adrift in a sea of hillbillies is losing its sting. Country collaborators are no longer considered “exotic.” In fact, stars like Stapleton, Morris, Brown, **Sam Hunt** and **Kelsea Ballerini** are tightly connected to a slice of mainstream America and as such, an attractive conduit to new fans.

Needless to say, Levy, Williams, Hasson, Rountree, Neal and like-minded colleagues are mixing it up and making it happen—and in the process paving a path to the future of Music City.■



“The audience now tells us what they care about. This is a beautiful thing. It means artists like Tyler Childers can tour sheds and arenas and headline major festivals.”
—Wasserman’s **Keith Levy**

Keith Levy (left); with Shakey Graves and Bodie Johnson



“My roster spans genres, and I believe in taking principles and lessons from each to benefit all, which in turn perpetuates any tendency an artist has toward genre-bending.”
—UTA’s **Jeffrey Hasson**

Jeffrey Hasson (left); with Jeffrey Ruston and Brittney Spencer



Hunter Williams (left); with Jelly Roll