

# Amplifying the positives

As a 30-year veteran of the music industry, Rob Stringer is intent that past mistakes are not repeated. The Sony Music CEO has no problem with dissenting voices in the workplace but is vocal about one thing: everyone needs to be in tune with the creative side of the business.

By Ed Stocker  
Photography Noah Kalina

You wouldn't guess that Rob Stringer has called the US home for more than a decade. Despite the passage of time, he still speaks with the glottal stops of a home-counties Englishman, the only acquiescence to his adopted country coming when he pronounces the word "artists" as though it contained a "d". You wouldn't know, either, that he is CEO of Sony Music Entertainment, based on the way he interacts with the staff running a coffee station in his office building, all the while carrying the tripod of the photographer sent to shoot his portrait. He may be running the world's second-largest music conglomerate in cut-throat New York but there's still a remnant of the humble lad from Buckinghamshire.

Stringer has been CEO of Sony's music arm since April of last year, a role he says recognises the "sheer volume of experience" he has. A music-industry lifer, he has been with Sony in one guise or another for more than 30 years. His career started in London in the marketing department before sidestepping into artists and repertoire (A&R) and, finally, business management. In the 1990s he was managing director of Epic, one of the group's labels, before being appointed chairman of Sony Music UK in 2001. Now 56, he crossed the pond in his mid-forties – something that meant he "probably avoided a midlife crisis", he jokes – to head up Sony's biggest imprint, Columbia, before assuming his current position.

Despite his title, Stringer says he couldn't do what he's doing now without having had a solid immersion in the creative side of the company. He believes that the current incarnation of the music business rewards it more than ever and that means everyone, including him, needs to be able to "talk the creative language of the

artists". Stringer explains that a lot of the reason for this is the shifting industry landscape, as it has gone from boom to quasi-bust and then bounced back due to revenue generated by streaming. While that means Sony is now in much more robust health, it also presents its own set of challenges. For one, the company isn't quite the master of its own destiny that it once was, with manufacturing of CDs and cassettes out of the picture and third parties controlling new digital distribution channels.

The response to this new reality, Stringer suggests, is to not take anything for granted and to ensure that Sony Music is nimble enough to react to changes. He, of course, has had a front seat during the industry's ups and downs and is keen to learn from past mistakes. "We've got to make sure that we don't blow it again," he says. "Our industry has a reputation for missing moments – an MTV video moment, an iTunes moment – and my job is to not miss the next moment when there's a warning sign."

Stringer describes his management style as "involved" and he clearly likes to have a rock-solid grip on what's going on in the company. But he says he's not as directly hands-on as when he was boss of Columbia. Neither, though, is he the executive sitting in a glass-walled corner office pulling all the strings, even if he does put a premium on maintaining good relationships with artists. He says the business these days is far too complex, with "too many moving parts" to oversee it all like that. Instead he's there to deliver on growth and continued success by making sure everyone is tuned in to each other's rhythm. "That is probably the main thing I do: make sure everything goes at the same pace," he says.

Sony Music Entertainment may be based in the Big Apple but it reports to its Japanese umbrella company, Sony Corporation, in Tokyo (Stringer's brother Howard was its first foreign president, stepping down in 2012). Stringer says he's conscious of keeping his bosses in the loop but adds that they are understanding and ask the right questions. Being ahead of the game when it comes to communication ensures his New York team is not "suddenly foisting something on Tokyo that has been brewing for a year". An example of that fluid working relationship came in May, he explains, with the move to up Sony's stake in EMI Music Publishing – which secures royalties on copyright – to 90 per cent. "That shows that the Japanese company is progressive about where the business is going," he says.

Stringer is engaging, opinionated and full of energy – the latter clearly something needed for this role. In his short time at the helm he's had to deal with the departure of former Epic exec LA Reid after sexual-misconduct allegations and has helped to bring about a work-culture shift, which he calls "an integral part" of his job. Then there are the ongoing discussions about rights models, contracts and even eyeing up the possibility of getting into streaming – although he's quick to add that allowing Sony Music to become as swollen as it was in the past "would be a disaster".

Presiding over 5,000 staff members around the world is never going to be seamlessly slick but Stringer seems aware of what he wants to achieve. He's also mentoring the executives below him with one eye on the future, imparting knowledge gleaned over his three decades in the business. Even after that amount of time, he says, "I'm learning as I go along." — (M)



## The rules:

1. **What time are you at your desk?**  
09.30.

2. **Best place to prepare for leadership: MBA school or on the job?**  
I've never been to MBA school so I can't answer that. Maybe if I'd gone to MBA school I'd be even better at what I do.

3. **Do you want to be liked or respected?**  
In my thirties and forties, probably liked; in my fifties, probably respected.

4. **What technology do you carry on a trip?**  
An iPhone and iPad, with music on both.

5. **Do you read management books?**  
I've just read a management book about team-building: *The Culture Code* by Daniel Coyle. Even though I'm 30 years in, I changed my management style in meetings after reading it.

6. **Who do you go to for advice?**  
I have a brother [Howard] who's been there, seen it all and done it. He was a pretty good benchmark for most of my career.

7. **What is the most difficult part of your job?**  
Because it's a fast-moving, creative business you've got to keep the adrenaline levels up. You cannot drop gears.

8. **Is it OK for employees to disagree?**  
Yes. We're in a volatile industry; there are always two ways to record a song.

9. **Have you ever made a mistake you wish you could take back?**  
It's more to do with being headstrong early in jobs and then wishing I'd been more patient.

10. **If you could fix one thing about your company today, what would it be?**  
I would get the balance between musical genres perfect – and that's very hard to do.