

JOHN ESPOSITO

Clutter-Free Relentlessness

For many in the country industry and Country radio, Warner Music/Nashville President John Esposito was a complete unknown when he assumed command of what had been Warner Bros./Nashville in September 2009. But Nashville was anything but unfamiliar territory to Esposito. As President/CEO of WEA Corp., his oversight of sales, marketing and distribution brought him in close contact with many Nashville hit makers. In his prior role as GM/EVP of Island-Def Jam Music Group, Esposito worked closely with the company's Music City branch. And his relationship with country music extends back to his days in music retailing. He is also, as some have already experienced first-hand, a rather capable vocalist, guitar player and drummer.

In the five months he's been on the job, Esposito's interactions in the music community and regular visits to Country radio stations have helped to introduce him to key decision makers, but his plans for WMN have been, to this point, closely held. Country Aircheck sat down with him in early February for an exclusive conversation about the direction this newly structured company will take. From a clear definition of roles and adding a promotion team, to integrating support functions and charging A&R with picking singles, he offers a candid view of the kind of focus and intensity he expects to foster.

Warner Music created this new division last year. Whose idea was it for you to come to Nashville as its top executive?

Lyor Cohen, my boss. He hates to be called my boss, but I'm a child of the idea that the person I report to is my boss. Lyor is wonderful and I've worked with him for years. I was the GM of Island-Def Jam from the late '90s until 2002, when I came over to be President of WEA. Lyor was my supervisor; he likes to say partner. He's the guy who motivates me and mentors me and all of that. We did the radio promotion for Luke Lewis' label on the Shania Twain pop releases. And when Luke wanted to start Lost Highway, he needed a partner in New York to help support him. Since we already had a relationship, Lyor said, "Let's do it." He assigned me to be the liaison in New York because he knew I especially loved the Americana version of country that Lost Highway in its early days was going to be.

So when Lyor got to Warner Music and wanted to make some changes, he literally came down to me and said, "Are you ready to go start your Lost Highway?" That was his metaphor; it's not literal. He knew I was a logical choice — someone he trusted and who had offered to pitch in if he ever needed help at a record label in Nashville. At that moment, I had no idea what Lyor really meant. I knew Atlantic was thinking of starting a label; I thought it might have been that.

Any hesitation?

Zero.

What is your background with country music?

Growing up, it was the Eagles, Poco, Buffalo Springfield, Loggins & Messina. I don't remember how I heard "Forever And Ever Amen" because I wouldn't have been in a situation to have heard that song. Every friend had Led Zeppelin in their collection, not Randy Travis. When I heard it, the sound was extraordinary to me. I went out and bought it; the first official country record I ever bought. I was living in Plainfield, NJ at the time, and I remember playing it for people and getting the "What happened to you?" expression. And I would say, "Just listen to this voice. It's just undeniable." It was the start of my diving a little deeper into country music. And I now I get to spend time with him, and it's such an honor.

We're working on a couple of projects with him at the same time. His 25th anniversary — imagine that — of *Storms Of Life*. We've got a cool duets project of his classic tracks. Not all from that record, but it is the centerpiece. He also wants to do a record of classics and we love the idea, but we don't want it to come off like, no offense to Rod Stewart, but that version of classics. So we're at lunch trying to define the A&R of it, and Randy starts singing me "Nowhere Man." And I'm thinking, "I get paid for this?" This beautiful voice from across the table. It's magic. And that song, if it makes the record, will probably be the most known.

We want them to be songs that sound familiar but haven't

been recorded a million times. I tell Randy that, God willing, if I have some success here we're going to put a Mount Rushmore on top of this building eventually and his face will be one of them. I love the fact that we still have someone on our roster who is an icon. And what's really fun is the love of all our other artists for him. When they heard about the duets record they started hawking me, "How do I get on that record?"

Is the Nashville at all a culture shock for a Northeast, New York, New Jersey kind of guy?

I'm from Punxsutawney, PA. It's 30 miles on two-lane highways between towns out there. New York was a wonderful 30-year experience, but it's not like those were my roots. The first time I came to Nashville was 1993 for the CMA Awards. I was working at a retailer in New York called The Wiz. I loved Mary Chapin Carpenter and she was going to play. The guys from Sony knew I loved her, so they flew me down and wined and dined me because I was one of their big customers.

There was no turning back; from that point on I started visiting Nashville two, three and up to four, five or six trips a year for the last decade. I even came here last year because I'm a songwriter and cut tracks at Big Kenny's studio with some of the greatest session players in Nashville. I got the studio for free; I had to pay for the musicians. That was eye-opening for me. There's still so much I had to learn when I got here, but it wasn't like I was told to go to some foreign country I'd never been to.

Ever get to Country Radio Seminar on those trips?

No, but I'm looking forward to this one coming up.

I can hardly wait to talk to you afterwards. Before you moved here, what kind of feeling did you have for the way Nashville does business?

The thing that has fascinated me more than anything is the publishing community. I didn't know them that well. In New York and L.A., you typically sign an artist to a label and then to a publishing deal. It's not one song at a time. As much as you can read about that on paper, it's very different to come down here and watch the people who have hordes of things they don't want to share with you until the right moment. I love my A&R people, but they don't share. When an artist is about to go in [to the studio], I watch them open the drawer and pull the little magic things they've been sitting on for just the right moment. It's a whole different animal to me, and one that I've come to love.

When executives come to Nashville from L.A. and New York, usually the one thing they talk about is how differently they can interact with artists. Have you noticed that?

One hundred percent. There is still some of that "I don't want to play it for you until it's finished," but at the early





Game On: Mean Joe Greene looks on as Esposito works at his desk. Elsewhere, (inset) a framed writing proclaims, "This space reserved for our first gold record as Warner Music Nashville." A platinum companion hangs beside it.

stages when they're putting their ideas together about what they're recording, artists absolutely want to have partnerships and take our input. One of the things that really attracted to me to this town is there is so much less pretension with country artists. I joke with people outside of Nashville that there are more guitars per living room than any other city in America. You can go to the banker and they've got three guitars right there. And they're tuned. These things are not decorations. They're there because the banker knows Kix Brooks is going to come in, have a glass wine of and play a couple of songs.

I don't want to dwell on Blake Shelton, but he's the thing with the most wind in our sales today. I happened to meet Blake through

this team to execute.

The thing I have found most fascinating is you can't get away from the business. I could walk out the front door of my Rockefeller Plaza office and walk for five days and not bump into one person from the music business. I can't go buy a cup of coffee in Starbucks and shake hands with somebody without hearing a half-hour later, "I think Esposito just had a meeting with this guy and might be hiring him." Oh, my goodness!

It's no secret that I let go of our former head of promotion and have been very much on the search for one. I've had to have every meeting at my house because nobody wants to be seen. Okay, that's cool. But I'm not used to the fact that I can't go to the YMCA and not

And the length of time the average song from add date to, if you're lucky, peaking in the top 10, is much more protracted. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. These things are theory when you're reading about them, but when you're living them you realize you only get so many swings at bat. You really better have the most magnificent artists and the most magnificent songs. The relationship of going and talking to Country radio is the same I would have with Z100/New York. It's just there are fewer of them and it's that one funnel.

I want A&R to lead this company. I don't want this company to be picking singles by committee. I want the people who found the artists to have a sense of conviction that they

I've enjoyed going to meet Country radio and have been to a number of markets. I'm going out tomorrow to Houston, and I'll be out the next two weeks, too, just to hear how they view our approach and what we can do to make sure we have a better chance to win. I'm digging these people; they're all humans. Ultimately, promotion is sales to radio, and I've been a salesman my whole life. I like the activity of going out and having them tell me why they don't do something so I can figure out how I'm going to convince them to do something they may not want to do.

Any surprises as you watch the charts?

I swear I'm not being humble, but there's so much to learn. There are, obviously, ways

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Jim Ed Norman eight years ago when, as he describes it, he looked like Terri Clark. Through this process, meeting after meeting and call after call, he wants to decide these things together. That's not, by and large, my experience. It's more the managers talking to you outside of Nashville. This is refreshing, and it is indulgent from a music standpoint.

Anything since you've been here about the way Nashville does business that is either humorous, stupefying or just stupid?

I am not being humble when I tell you I am still in the learning process. The last thing in the world I want to be, and particularly now that I've made the decision to spend the rest of my life here in Nashville, is the guy who is going to tell anybody how to do things. Everybody else can tell me how to do things, and that will shape a vision I will work with

get interrupted 20 times while I'm working out. At Whole Foods, it's "Hey, Espo!" And by the way, it's all good; I like it. But I do like to shut down. There has to be a time for my brain to not think about the business so I can come back in on Monday and have a freshness to it.

What have you learned in the brief time you've been here about the relationship between labels and Country radio, and how that relationship differs from other formats?

There's not a significant difference in how you would approach radio. The significant difference is that in most other genres you have numerous paths to go down, whereas you really have one lane to go down in Country. You can get fires started in the deeper hinterlands of formats that ultimately build up to the big mamma-jamma of Pop, but you don't have that opportunity here.

know the artists the most, understand the format the most and should pick those singles. I want them to appreciate that they'd better pick the right singles. They'd better give the team that's going to go to radio the right ammunition. A big part of what I try to do in my job besides be a cheerleader, which is really a big part of what I believe my job is and has made me successful so far in my career, is un-cluttering things. If you only get so many swings at the bat at Country radio, you'd better not be thinking about other things that take you off that focus. I don't want us to aim at No. 2; I want us to be No. 1. If I'm doing any activity that takes me off my game of closing toward that, that's a problem. I'm constantly walking around finding, "What are the things people are having to do that would not be part of their core purview? And what can I do to get it off their plate?"

to make sure you can have the success that is the difference between No. 1 and No. 3 or cracking the top 10 — those benchmarks. It starts with music. It has to be magnificent to have a chance, and that alone may not pull you through. You not only have to have the relationships, but also know which stations can influence other stations and how to sequence that process. I'm going to learn that and have it become second-nature. I'm fortunate that I knew enough people down here — some who are competitors and might not be inclined to educate me — but some who aren't and know how that promotion thing works in Country a lot better than I do. I'm getting a lot of great input, so I figure if you come back and interview me in a year I might even be able to tell you exactly how it works. Off the record, of course!

Is there anything that stands out in particular as you talk to Country programmers?

Every experience that has added something to the toolbelt has been helpful. I'm starting to figure out who wants to give input about which one of two songs they like some. Some don't particularly want that; I'm learning the difference. Another thing I'm learning is that we could have all done a better job of getting out with them more often. I don't know exactly why before I got down here they didn't want to engage them. But as a road warrior who enjoys going to dinners and really getting to know people so that you have a deeper sense of what makes them tick, you find out most of them welcome that. You might get preached to by some, but people want us to succeed. They really want us to give them great music; they don't want us to half-ass it. They actually do respond to the squeaky wheels getting more grease. And I want us to have the relentlessness.

If I've learned any one consistent thing, it's that each one has a different way of approaching relationships, but they actually do want to have a relationship with us despite the fact that they're getting hammered by dozens and dozens of "us" and despite having a limited number of hours in the day. From a competitive standpoint, I watch who is having the most success, and the very simple key is relationships. That is from a relentlessness I've seen that I want to bring to us. I'd rather us be carnivores than backpackers.

Are there any specifics about Country radio you've learned from talking to these programmers?

A general sense that an artist needs to be dedicated to the format, and please be sure that they are. They're not mad if an artist is dedicated to the format, has great success and has some crossover success as long as that artist doesn't then want to abandon them. Because they get a limited number of plays a week. They want to be spinning people they think they're going to be facing year after year and will be helping to build their brand equity. Everybody has made that point with me one way or another. It's one thing to hear it from your staff. For me, it gets more in my fiber if I actually hear it from them and how they articulate that common thread.

To specifics now with your plans for Warner Music/Nashville: There are lots of rumors about two labels or three. Where are you right now?

I'VE SAID IT IN FRONT OF THE ENTIRE STAFF: IF EVERYBODY IS PICKING THE SINGLE, I DON'T KNOW WHO TO SHOOT. THE A&R DEPARTMENT'S JOB IS TO BE MASTERFUL AT FINDING THAT ARTIST AND THE SONG.

We will do it slightly differently than many of the rumors might suggest. I oversee Word and the newly renamed country label group Warner Music Nashville, which includes Warner Bros. Nashville and Atlantic Nashville. I have been given not only a charge from New York, but also the wherewithal financially where I can build out our staff in areas such as marketing, publicity and promotion.

We will make some other moves here to become more locally self-sufficient, but will continue to work with our partners at Atlantic and Warner Bros. on certain projects. When records really blow up, we could use some of their extra marketing staff because, at the end of the day, we're only so many people down here.

Having said that, a majority of our roster is signed to enhanced rights deals. I'd like us to have the local team and the wherewithal to execute on these deals at an extraordinary level so the artists can see we're doing it because if we work at helping to build that brand with you, we should all share in the joy of that. We owe it to the artists to show we can execute at a level that's better than anyone else. The Warner Music Group already developed lots of these capabilities, but I also want to be able to



manage lots of it here in Nashville.

For instance, when we tell an artist we'll handle your merchandising, it's not like we'll email designs to you. We're going to walk you in and the people who make the designs and manage the production will be right there. We're going to build out rooms that will showcase our capabilities. We'll have a group of technologists that artists can sit with and design the website together with us on the spot.

And what are you doing with promotion?

I have heard so many absolute "facts" about what I'm doing, it's wonderful. When I'm interviewing people for the Senior VP/Promotion ...

At your house.

... at my house. I'm told, "Well I heard you're doing this." And I hear it from like five

and Sinatra. I tell the artists that they are litmus tests for me. One guy wrote all his songs and nobody wondered whether he was authentic. But everybody thinks Frank Sinatra wrote all those songs, right? Well, you guys don't, but ask my mother or somebody outside the business. It's a "Sinatra song" because he had an authenticity that was so extraordinary. The interpretation made you think he owned the song.

I want our artists all to be measured against that. When you listen to Brett Eldredge, there's not a chance you won't say, "Holy cow, he feels that in his bones." It's wonderful that he happens to be co-writing all the songs, which is not an imperative but happens to be a luxury we got with him. That's what I want to feel. It's easier for me to elevate my passion and be the cheerleader I need to be when I feel that artist

let's go out and give a value on this. It's going to be priced very sharply on the shelf, and God bless Wal-Mart, they're thrilled that we're the first ones and are giving us extraordinary support to help drive this record. You will not miss Blake Shelton in a Wal-Mart store on March 2, trust me.

What kind of input do you expect promotion to have in single selection?

My only proclamation is that I hope the A&R and promotion departments have the deepest of relationships. I've said this to my A&R department and I've said it in front of the entire staff. If everybody is picking the single, I don't know who to shoot. At the end of the day, your A&R department's job is to be masterful at finding that artist and the song. I would hope they are partners and bring the promotion

different people. Quite often I've never even met with whomever they're talking about.

The most important thing I can do is get a very senior-level person in promotion who can be a partner in not only making sure we're delivering at an extraordinary level for our artists, but also in making sure we have a staff that is a good combination of strategy and closers. But I want this person to be a strategist with me for the constant shaping of Warner Music Nashville.

There is a lot of speculation about whether we will have more imprints. I'm not even talking about doing that until we make sure we're taking care of our current roster. I am so uber-focused on delivering for the great artists we already have.

What's your sense of where country music is today, and what do you look for in an artist to sign?

Lyor uses the word magnificent and I think it's the most appropriate word. Good is the enemy of great. We have to sign great, magnificent artists. You're here in my office and see my collection of stuff that does include pictures of me with country artists through the years. But you see Springsteen

has that much magic. Because when you're not sure, you don't run against the wall as hard.

As for the sound of country music, I listen to that chart and hear a lot of different things. I don't feel like there is "a sound." Even at the top of the chart, I don't feel like one sound is winning, which, to me, is encouraging because I'm not trying to sign one sound. It's wonderful that it could be Reba one week, Lady Antebellum the next, Miranda gets up there and, God willing, Blake. And none of those sound the same. I hope we can have a diverse enough roster that you fall in love for different reasons.

Is the six-cut LP an experiment or something that will be done across the roster?

It's an experiment until we find out if our theory works. God bless Blake and [manager] Narvel [Blackstock] for coming along. We've been getting hawked this idea from Wal-Mart for some years: Don't wait until you have 12 or 13 songs, come out more consistently. Blake is the kind of artist who has had radio success and some sales success, but not the kind we wanted. We said, "This could be a perfect thing" because he just keeps recording, so we could come out with something every six months. [When] we have this massive track,

person down to say, "Hey, what do you think?" But what I've noticed is people can get wobbly and indecisive if they're starting to ask everybody to have input. When I talk about uncluttering, I have a sense that's not a unique trait that had been going on here, that single selection by committee had been an impediment in other places. I'm one who believes in conviction, and it starts there. That's what A&R's job is.

I've played music for every radio programmer I've been with. I want them to know I'm not only passionate about music, but I also want to share with them some of the stuff I think deserves to be played on their radio station. I'm more interested in getting their body language than I am in having them pick the single. As I've heard and have experienced, that can be all over the map, and then you've forced yourself into this indecisive mode. The best shot we have is if everybody on my team runs against that wall with the same force, and nobody is going slightly to the left or right because they had the chance to say, "Well I didn't think that was the right one." If the A&R people don't consistently come up with the one, it's my job to fix. Blame it on me. Trust that they picked the right one, and let's all run that way together.

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