

# LABEL OF THE YEAR

## Arista returns to the top: "We Believe"

**T**he numbers speak for themselves. Arista has 11 of the Top 100 songs of the year, three of the top 10, five of the top 20 and nine of the top 50. Market share is a doubt-destroying 14.8%. And then there are the individual success stories – like CMA and ACM Song of the Year "Believe" by Brooks & Dunn, another No. 1 for Phil Vassar, a gold record on Keith Anderson, Brad Paisley's Album of the Year, Alan Jackson's record breaking Precious Memories, mercurial newcomer Jason Michael Carroll and, oh yeah, the quadruple platinum supernova named Carrie Underwood.

But charts, awards and other milestones don't tell the whole story. Because this may look like a simple return to the top for the label that led Mediabase-powered chart share from 2001 through 2004 (bumped out by Capitol in '05). The truth, however, is that the Arista promotion staff, which opened the year under new management, had a number of questions to answer about itself. And after a whirlwind year with its share of struggle, this group seems to have come through, if anything, even stronger.

Arista's biggest question mark, to put it bluntly, was VP/Promotion Skip Bishop, who joined the label in October of 2005. "We had a new VP, a new National, we went from six regionals to five and we had a lot of new music at one time," says Sony BMG Chairman Joe Galante of the challenges Arista faced.

There's also the not so small matter of the Sony merger with BMG, which included the integration of Sony/Nashville into the RCA Label Group. "There's no doubt in my mind Skip's team performed way beyond because there were a lot of things Butch and Joe were occupied with," Galante says, referencing his No. 2, Exec. VP Butch Waugh. "It's like jumping in a car that's already

rolling," Bishop says. "It takes a minute to find the gear shift. These guys didn't know what I was about, and I needed to learn them. I found out very quickly it is an amazing team of strategists."

The Arista staff eventually shaped up with Bryan Frasher as Director/National Promotion, Jeri Detweiler Cooper in the Southeast, David Friedman working Northeast, Lori Hartigan in the West, Lesly Somerville handling Mid-South, Alex Valentine doing Southwest and Alicia Butler serving as Coordinator. They weren't afforded a lot of time to get comfortable with their new captain.

"To give Skip credit, he was following Bobby [Kraig]," Galante says. "That was not an easy thing to do both from an emotional standpoint for the staff, and also for the roster. We talk about the promotion guys, but you kind of forget about the artists and he didn't know anybody. All of a sudden he's got their careers in his hands. He did an amazing job in both areas. What he's done in the last year normally takes a lot longer."

Bishop, recommended for the job by Waugh, immersed himself in the music. "I don't think I've listened to another format since Butch first called me and planted the seed," he says. "From that day I started listen-

ing to all the artists' catalog, researching their stats and got to know them that way."

Next, he had to develop the personal relationships with the artists. "I called them up and told them I had zero credibility, but I like to learn," he says. "I found out it is an extremely accepting format and an extremely accepting group of people."

As for the staff, the cohesion was formed with the struggle involved in promoting "Believe," which Galante terms "a slugfest."

"That made us gel as a team," Bishop says. "Every day we came in and that was the first thing we talked about. There would be a new leak in the bucket we had to fix and a new hill to take. We rolled up our sleeves and got to know each other through that record. It was a long haul."

"People will write histories at some point in the future and tell us it was a No. 1 record, and it wasn't," Galante says. "It wasn't an easy record. It never researched and we went through a lot of crap, but the power of that record at the consumer level was incredible. We sold 700,000 albums on that single...[and it] is still driving that album."

The disappointments include Jackson's "Like Red On A Rose," which also struggled at radio but has out-



Joe Galante



**P**ropelling Arista to its lofty heights were 17 charted records, 11 of which are in the Top 100. Arista notched 11 Top 15 hits and six No. 1s that occupied the top spot for 14 weeks. Leading the way was Carrie Underwood, who posted three hits that spent an incredible 10 weeks at No. 1 and Brad Paisley, whose pair of chart-toppers were on top a total of three weeks.

Capitol, last year's top imprint, follows-up an 11.5% chart share in 2005 with this year's 10.6%. Sr. VP Jimmy Harnen and his crew posted 16 charted records, nine Top 15 hits, 11 in the Top 100 and three No. 1s – all by Dierks Bentley.

MCA moved from fourth last year to third in 2006 on the strength of 15 charted tunes, 10 Top 15s and four smashes that spent nine weeks at No. 1.

performed itself sales-wise, according to Galante. "This is the beginning of the life of this record," Bishop says. "It will not follow the typical path."

But the tussles were vastly overshadowed by the triumphs: Like seeing Paisley "raise his game," in Galante's words, to join the genre's top entertainers, and watching Underwood transcend her Idol status to become a bona fide superstar.

For Bishop, 2006 was encapsulated in an Arista-only meeting recently held in a local bed and breakfast. "We looked at everything that happened this year," he explains. "The great things, the things that didn't work so great, the heartbreaks, the joyous moments. It was very intense."

"Afterward we had dinner, just us," he continues. "And we dressed for dinner. We sat in the dining room of this house and told stories about who our heroes are, our biggest disappointments in life, what we like best about our jobs. It was one of the most moving family moments I've ever experienced in an employment situation. I came out of there knowing this team loves music, and I think we came out tighter, meaner, happier and more focused. We came out like, 'Okay show me the door to '07 because we're going to do it again.'" CAC

**PICTURE IN PICTURE:** The Arista promotion staff (l-r) includes Alicia Butler, Skip Bishop, Lesly Somerville, Bryan Frasher, Jeri Detweiler Cooper and David Friedman. In absentia: Alex Valentine and Lori Hartigan.

## 2006 TOP TEN LABELS

- 1 **ARISTA** NASHVILLE 14.8%
- 2 **Capitol** RECORDED MUSIC 10.6%
- 3 **MCA** NASHVILLE 9.1%
- 4 **BNA** BNA RECORDS LABEL 7.9%
- 5 **LYRIC STREET** RECORDS 7.5%
- 6 **CURB** RECORDS curb.com 7.4%
- 7 **Mercury** RECORDS 7.3%
- 8 **WB** 6.5%
- 9 **COLUMBIA** NASHVILLE 3.9%
- 10 **SHOW DOG** NASHVILLE 3.8%