

BMI: Embracing the Future, Honoring the Past

By Crystal Caviness



The leaders at BMI think of themselves as caretakers, in the business of protecting copyrights, nurturing the careers of songwriters and publishers and servicing music users, too.

In fact, this performing rights organization was born in direct response to these needs. In 1939, a group of radio executives concluded that writers and publishers of original American musical genres - Country, gospel, blues, R&B and folk - weren't getting the protection in music licensing that they deserved.

Rushing to the newly opened doors of BMI in Nashville were Eddy Arnold, Johnny Horton, Roy Orbison and Hank Williams, writers and often performers of some of the nation's most legendary music.

"The largest percentage of Country Music Hall of Fame inductees, and also in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, are from BMI," said Jody Williams, BMI VP of Writer and Publisher Relations, adding that many of the sub-genres BMI first represented in the 1940s melded into rock 'n' roll in the mid-'50s.

"It's great to talk about our history, because it's very rich," he said.

At the same time, insisted BMI President and CEO Del Bryant, "It's not our job to remember and revel in the past. It's our job to embrace the future and honor the past. And that's what we do: Whether it's technologically speaking or musically speaking, we certainly honor what brought us here."

Part of what brought BMI to its current success is 21st-century Country icons Brooks & Dunn, Vince Gill and Toby Keith, all multi-Platinum-selling artists who are also award-winning songwriters, a boon to any performing rights organization's catalog.

"Thank goodness we have [people like] Kix Brooks, Ronnie Dunn and Toby Keith. They write, and they are constantly on the radio. That's good for our licensing," Williams said. "But we've got to be out there signing these new, meaningful writers, like Taylor Swift. She's having an impact on the radio. In a couple of years, we hope to brag that we've added significantly to BMI's bottom line by signing the lion's share of Nashville's best new writers."

Williams and his team are also searching for new songwriting stars in other genres. These days, for example, BMI boasts awards events that range from Country to Latin, from Urban to pop. Earlier this year, the company honored the popular Mexican band Los Tigres del Norte at its Latin festivities in Las Vegas.

Urban awards were also presented in September; Babyface, James Brown, Al Green and Isaac Hayes have been honored at this event in previous years. Similar presentations are made annually for Christian artists, gospel "Trailblazers" and achievements in film music.

"Our writer team has to be knowledgeable in all forms of music," Williams said. "We also take care of all the Christian music, the gospel music, the rock music. In terms of BMI's history, it was all about what wasn't mainstream at first, and then it became mainstream. If a certain kind of music is breaking out in a part of the country, you better get down there. We don't want to be scooped by our competition."

The word "competition" comes up frequently around BMI because, as Bryant puts it, "BMI is the organization that really introduced competition" into the U.S. performing rights business.

When BMI began, ASCAP was already in place, dominating the U.S. market at the time. Having BMI step in and

make measurable inroads in the performing rights arena was unique in the performing rights world, Bryant said, not only in the United States but beyond its borders too.

"We still have a competitive nature that you don't really find in the belly of any other beast, other than perhaps the mythical competition between Hertz and Avis."

Yet BMI prides itself in its urge to excel, according to Bryant: "We don't sit around thinking about the competition. It's not important. What is important is that we do this better or that better. Our focus is the songwriter across the desk."

For the songwriter, choosing representation from a PRO often comes down to the paycheck, which is closely tied to the collection of music license fees from music users.

"I'm awfully proud that companies like BMI operate on a non-profit-making basis and provide access for businesses to easily license the entire BMI repertoire, enabling us to get the royalty fees back to the writers," Bryant said. "We do that with a fee structure that keeps the doors open, pays salaries and builds the technology for us to do it efficiently and effectively."

Technological innovations have changed the way the music business operates. While new music delivery systems, such as Internet music streaming and file sharing, have negatively impacted certain facets such as record sales, Bryant applauds technological advances.

"Thank goodness for technology," he said. "We have billions of performances today in the Internet world. We have thousands upon thousands of agreements with people who are streaming music. There has been an incredible proliferation of cable, satellite, ringtones and other new channels for music. Technology is absolutely a necessity in this world of expanding tonnage, number of performances and the complexity of the business. We could not handle this brave new world without the power and efficiency that technology provides."

BMI leaders are especially proud of one particular advancement: Landmark Digital Services, LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary, which is the home to the BlueArrow fingerprint technology.

This new technology will greatly expand BMI's ability to measure the performance of music on radio, television, cable, satellite and the Internet.

"Landmark is going to be one of the most important additions to BMI to come about in many, many years," Bryant said. "We've purchased the technology. We've built the software, the application and the infrastructure, and we continue to fill the library." Bryant credits Bob Barone, Managing Director of Landmark, and BMI COO/Executive VP John Cody for the success which Landmark is achieving.

Keeping BMI's culture open to embracing newness, whether updating technology or discovering writers, is key to the company's success, Bryant said. He closed with the thought that, "It has to be an open culture to be able to grab onto the next star that makes progress possible."

On the Web: www.bmi.com

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