

billboard

THE SPORTS ISSUE



STARRING

NBA MVP SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER,

R&B STAR GIVĒON

AND THE POWERHOUSE MANAGER

BEHIND THEM, SIMON GEBRELUL

From left: GIVĒON,
Gilgeous-Alexander
and Gebrelul.



40:10

40 años sembrando fe, 10 años amplificando propósito.

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FEB. 7, 2026
VOLUME 138
NO. 2

ON THE COVER
From left: GIVÉON,
Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and
Simon Gebrelul photographed
by Diwang Valdez on Dec. 20,
2025, at Paycom Center
in Oklahoma City.

THIS PAGE
GIVÉON

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Billboard will publish its next
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Sienna Spiro

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POWER
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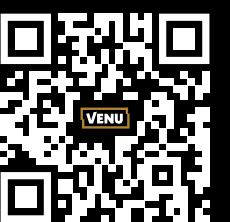
2026 BILLBOARD POWER 100 DISRUPTOR AWARD WINNER

Presented by **Billboard** and **VENU** President of Growth and Strategy Terri Liebler, **PlaqueBoyMax** was honored at **Billboard's 2026 Power 100** in Los Angeles for reshaping what it looks like to build and create as an artist today.

From streamer to recording artist, his breakout track "**Victory Lap**" with Fred again.. and Skepta reached **No. 4** on Billboard's Hot Dance Electronic Songs chart and earned a **2026 Grammy nomination**.

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list honorees—Claudia Butzky and
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charts

DATA FOR WEEK OF 2.07.2026



Megadeth's Mega-Wait For First No. 1

BILLBOARD 200

1
Megadeth
Megadeth

LAST WEEK	PEAK POSITION	WEEKS ON CHART
-	1	1

A

FTER WAITING FOR nearly 40 years, Megadeth achieves its first No. 1 on the Billboard 200. The metal band's latest, eponymous set — its final planned studio album — starts atop the list with 73,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending Jan. 29, according to Luminate. Megadeth made its Billboard 200 debut in October 1986 with *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?* and has placed 23 albums on the ranking through its career, including nine top 10s. Until this issue, the group had reached as high as No. 2 with 1992's *Countdown to Extinction*.

The last group to wait longer for a first No. 1 was Black Sabbath. The band earned its initial leader in June 2013 with *13* — 42 years and 10

months after the act made its chart debut in 1970 with its self-titled set.

Meanwhile, Megadeth brings a hard rock album back to No. 1 on the chart for the first time since May 24, 2025, when Sleep Token's *Even in Arcadia* opened at the summit.

Megadeth also tallies the smallest week by units for any No. 1 album since May 3, when SZA's *SOS* returned to No. 1 with 52,000.

Megadeth's first week was largely powered by 69,000 in album sales, marking the band's best sales week since 1999. The album got a boost from its availability across more than a dozen vinyl variants, a Target-exclusive CD with a bonus track and the midweek release of a deluxe digital download edition with another bonus track.

—KEITH CAULFIELD

Hot 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
			#1 for 1 WEEK			
HOT SHOT DEBUT		1	Aperture KID HARPOON (H.STYLES,T.E.P.HULL)	Harry Styles ERSKINE/COLUMBIA	1	1
(6)	(6)	(2)	SAL Choosin' Texas E.LANGLEY,B.WEST,M.LAMBERT (E.LANGLEY,C.L.DICK,M.LAMBERT,J.TAYLOR) SAWGOD/COLUMBIA/TRIPLE TIGERS	Ella Langley	2	15
4	2	(3)	Man I Need Z.NAHOME (O.L.DEAN,T.JESSO.JR.,Z.NAHOME)	Olivia Dean POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	2	23
(3)	4	4	Golden HUNTR/X: EJAE, AUDREY NUNA & REI AMI IDO,24,TEDDY,J.EISENDRATH (EJAE,M.SONNENBLICK,J.G.KWAK,Y.H.LEE,24,TEDDY) VISVA/REPUBLIC		1	32
2	3	5	The Fate Of Ophelia MAX MARTIN, SHELLBACK, T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT, MAX MARTIN, SHELLBACK)	Taylor Swift REPUBLIC	1	17
(1)	(1)	6	AIR I Just Might BRUNO MARS,D'MILE (BRUNO MARS,D.EMILE II,P.M.LAWRENCE II,B.BROWN)	Bruno Mars ATLANTIC	1	3
5	5	7	Ordinary A.YARON (A.WARREN,A.YARON,C.SHAPIRO,MAGS DUVAL)	Alex Warren ATLANTIC	1	50
(8)	(7)	8	Back To Friends SOMBRA (S.BOOSE)	sombr SMB/WARNER	7	44
9	8	9	Folded A.HARRIS,D.K. THE PUNISHER,K.VAN RIDICK-TYNES,D.MILLS (K.A.PARRISH,D.KNIGHT,A.HARRIS,D.S.DIXSON,K.VAN RIDICK-TYNES,D.MILLS,D.K.WILSON)	Kehlani ATLANTIC	6	33
10	(10)	10	Opalite MAX MARTIN, SHELLBACK, T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT, MAX MARTIN, SHELLBACK)	Taylor Swift REPUBLIC	2	17
7	9	11	End Of Beginning DJO,A.THEIN (J.KEEERY)	Djo DJO/AWAL	6	26
11	11	12	Mutt L.THOMAS,FAXONLY,P.L.JOHNSON (L.G.THOMAS III,R.E.FAIRFAX III,L.A.CAMEJO,P.L.JOHNSON) EZMNY/MOTOWN/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	Leon Thomas	6	51
18	(13)	13	Where Is My Husband! RAYE,M.SABATH (R.A.KEEN,M.SABATH)	RAYE HUMAN RESOURCES	13	18
(12)	(12)	14	What You Saying MCVERTT (S.B.WOODS,M.CAMARA,A.SEDRAIA,P.B.KOEU,K.DENEYER)	Lil Uzi Vert COR(E)/ROC NATION	12	5
14	14	15	I Got Better J.MOI (M.C.WALLEN,M.W.HARDY,R.C.MCGILL,B.PENDERGRASS,E.K.SMITH,CHARLIE HANDSOME,J.S.REEVES) MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	Morgan Wallen	7	33
(16)	17	16	So Easy (To Fall In Love) J.H.RYAN,J.BUNNETTA,Z.NAHOME (O.L.DEAN,J.H.RYAN,A.R.ALLEN,M.WOLFGANG) POLYDOR/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	Olivia Dean	14	18
19	(18)	17	20 Cigarettes J.MOI (C.LACORTE,R.C.MCGILL,J.L.MILLER,B.PENDERGRASS)	Morgan Wallen MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	15	36
15	15	18	Daisies C.LANG,DIJON,MK.GEE,E.BENJAMIN,DYLAN WIGGINS,D.CHERTRIT (J.D.BIEBER,D.DUENAS,D.CHERTRIT,T.JESSO.JR.,M.T.GORDON,C.LANG,E.BENJAMIN,DYLAN WIGGINS)	Justin Bieber JRC/ILH/DEF JAM/REPUBLIC	2	28
(21)	(20)	19	Die On This Hill O.FEDI,M.POLLACK,B.SLATKIN (S.SPIRO,O.FEDI,M.R.POLLACK)	Sienna Spiro METHOD/CAPITOL/INTERSCOPE CAPITOL	19	6
27	(16)	20	wgft TURBO,SHOTTIE (A.AKOPIAN,CHANDLER A.GREAT,D.EBUNOLUWA OGULU,S.G.KITCHENS) GUNNA/YOUNG STONER LIFE/300/ATLANTIC	Gunna Feat. Burna Boy GUNNA/YOUNG STONER LIFE/300/ATLANTIC	16	25

Go to the Chart Beat section of billboard.com for complete charts coverage.



HOT 100

“Aperture”

Harry Styles

Harry Styles' "Aperture" takes the spotlight on the Billboard Hot 100, debuting at No. 1. The star earns his third leader on the chart, and second to debut in the top spot, after "As It Was" arrived in April 2022 to begin a 15-week reign. His

first No. 1, "Watermelon Sugar," spent a week atop the list in August 2020.

"Aperture" introduces Styles' fourth solo album, *Kiss All the Time*. *Disco*, Occasionally, due March 6. His first three sets all debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200: *Harry's House* (2022), *Fine Line* (2019) and *Harry Styles* (2017). (One Direction, with Styles as a member, notched four No. 1 albums in 2012-14, among five top 10s; "Aperture" is Styles' eighth Hot 100 top 10, with One Direction having scored six, led by a No. 2 peak for "Best Song Ever" in 2013.)

Released at 7 p.m. EST on Thursday, Jan. 22, followed by the premiere of its official video on Jan. 23, "Aperture" enters the Hot 100 with 18.2 million official streams, 27.1 million radio airplay audience impressions and 4,000 sold in the United States in its first full week of release (ending, Jan. 29), according to Luminate.

The single launches at No. 1 on the Streaming Songs chart, where it's Styles' second leader, after "As It Was"; No. 19 on Radio Songs, tying "As It Was" for his highest entry. [N. 1] [Digitally remastered]

highest start; and No. 4 on Digital Song Sales.

Meanwhile, reflecting warm welcomes for new music so far in 2026, Styles' "Aperture" is the second Hot 100 No. 1 debut this year. It dethroned Bruno Mars' "I Just Might," which spent its first two weeks on the chart at the summit. This year marks the earliest that two songs have opened at No. 1, surpassing 2024 by three days, as Ariana Grande's "Yes, And?" debuted atop the Jan. 27 ranking that year, followed by Megan Thee Stallion's "Hiss" on the Feb. 10 chart.

EARLY TRUST

HOT 100 FIRST-TIMERS

Artists who have recently made their initial appearances on the chart

ARTIST	SONG	DEBUT POSITION	DEBUT DATE
Sauce Walka	“Stop Snitching” with A\$AP Rocky featuring BossMan Dlow	62	Jan. 31
Jeff Buckley	“Lover, You Should’ve Come Over”	97	Jan. 31
Dave	“Raindance” with Tems	89	Feb. 7
Strawberry Guy	“Mrs. Magic”	97	Feb. 7



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BILLBOARD 200

93

XG

THE CORE

The group's first full-length also takes a bow on Top Dance Albums (No. 3), Top Album Sales (No. 5) and Independent Albums (No. 16).

核

172

Ari Lennox

Vacancy

The singer's third full-length also debuts at No. 25 on Top R&B Albums, while the set's title track climbs 16-14 on Adult R&B Airplay and "High Key" starts at No. 23 on Hot R&B Songs.

A woman with long dark hair is sitting on a green couch. She is wearing a sequined, low-cut dress. The background consists of orange and teal curtains.

173

Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band *Greatest Hits*

The group's longest-charting album reaches its 600th week on the list largely thanks to streaming. In the last three months, the set's songs typically generate 8 million to 10 million weekly on-demand official streams combined.

16

Louis Tomlinson

How Did I Get Here?

HOW DID I GET HERE?

whichever of those albums sells the most in a given week. And this issue, the band's top seller is *Greatest Hits* (2,000). —KEITH CAULFIELD

—KEITH CASEFIELD

Billboard 200

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BUNNY HOPPING TO THE TOP

The *DeBí TiRAR MÁS FOTO'S* world tour brings Bad Bunny back to stadiums, notching nearly \$100 million in December

EVERY TIME BAD BUNNY goes on tour, he leads *Billboard*'s monthly Top Tours chart — and now, he's done it for a record eighth time with the first reports from his *DeBí TiRAR MÁS FOTO'S* world tour.

On his 2022 trek, *El Último Tour del Mundo*, he led in back-to-back months with sold-out arena shows. Later that year, he returned to the road for two more months, upgrading to stadiums with *World's Hottest Tour*. When the *Most Wanted Tour* played American arenas in 2024, he pulled off a then-unprecedented hat-trick in March, April and May.

The *DeBí TiRAR MÁS FOTO'S* world tour was a record-breaker from the start. Each of its first three stops — two shows at Estadio Olímpico Félix Sánchez in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (Nov. 21-22), two at Estadio Nacional in San Jose, Costa Rica (Dec. 5-6) and eight at Estadio GNP Seguros in Mexico City (Dec. 10-12, 15-16, 19-21) — broke local records for revenue and attendance. Altogether, his eight shows in December grossed \$99.1 million and sold 633,000 tickets, according to figures reported to *Billboard* Boxscore.

Bad Bunny's eighth time at No. 1 breaks him out of a tie with Beyoncé, Coldplay and Elton John for the most appearances atop the chart since its 2019 launch. It's also the biggest one-month gross ever for a tour in Latin America. —ERIC FRANKENBERG

Top Tours

Artist	Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1 Bad Bunny	\$99.1M	633K	10
2 Lady Gaga	\$60.7M	319K	5
3 Trans-Siberian Orchestra	\$40.2M	511K	66
4 Shakira	\$35.7M	267K	10
5 Seventeen	\$26.1M	243K	7
6 Andrea Bocelli	\$22.2M	121K	10
7 Dua Lipa	\$18.7M	192K	3
8 Jonas Brothers	\$18.6M	171K	15
9 Backstreet Boys	\$14.8M	83.3K	5
10 Zac Brown Band	\$13.7M	65.3K	4



Top Boxscores

Artist(s)	Venue Date	Gross	Total Attendance	Promoter(s)
1 Bad Bunny	ESTADIO GNP SEGUROS, MEXICO CITY DEC. 10-12, 15-16, 19-21	\$86.7M \$547.36/\$54.04	518K 8	Live Nation, OCESA
2 Lady Gaga	ACCORD STADIUM, SYDNEY DEC. 12-13	\$27.5M \$233.96/\$78.26	144K 2	Live Nation
3 Lady Gaga	MARVEL STADIUM, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA DEC. 5-6	\$23.3M \$231.31/\$73.79	126K 2	Live Nation
4 Dua Lipa	ESTADIO GNP SEGUROS, MEXICO CITY DEC. 1-2, 5	\$18.7M \$173.80/\$37.17	192K 3	Live Nation
5 Backstreet Boys	SPHERE, LAS VEGAS DEC. 26-28, 30-31	\$14.8M \$375/\$85	83.3K 5	Live Nation
6 Shakira	ESTADIO VELEZ SARFIELD, BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA DEC. 8-9, 11	\$12.6M \$130	97K 3	Fenix Entertainment
7 Bad Bunny	ESTADIO NACIONAL DE COSTA RICA, SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA DEC. 5-6	\$12.4M \$371.49/\$68.27	115K 2	Move Concerts
8 Shakira	ESTADIO CENTENARIO, MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY DEC. 3-4	\$11.8M \$313.95/\$80.23	103K 2	DG Medios
9 Seventeen	KYOCERA DOME, OSAKA, JAPAN DEC. 4, 6-7	\$10.6M \$161.16/\$96.70	97,224 3	HYBE Japan
10 Phish	MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, NEW YORK DEC. 28-31	\$10.2M \$600/\$85	75.1K 4	Live Nation

CHEEZY/URBUT

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Top Venues

15,001 OR MORE CAPACITY

Venue	Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1 O2 Arena	LONDON	\$30.9M	329K	32
2 Sphere	LAS VEGAS	\$28.4M	148K	9
3 Madison Square Garden	NEW YORK	\$19.4M	120K	7
4 Co-Op Live	MANCHESTER, ENGLAND	\$13.6M	138K	11
5 State Farm Arena	ATLANTA	\$13.1M	112K	11
6 Capital One Arena	WASHINGTON, D.C.	\$12.2M	66.1K	6
7 T-Mobile Arena	LAS VEGAS	\$11.6M	75.5K	5
8 Barclays Center	BROOKLYN	\$10.1M	83.2K	7
9 Qudos Bank Arena	SYDNEY	\$9.1M	92K	8
10 American Airlines Center	DALLAS	\$7.7M	68K	6



5,001-10,000 CAPACITY

Venue	Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1 Radio City Music Hall	NEW YORK	\$116.5M	781K	134
2 Dolby Live	LAS VEGAS	\$13.1M	44.8K	11
3 The Theater at Madison Square Garden	NEW YORK	\$9.6M	121K	36
4 Hard Rock Live at Seminole Hard Rock	HOLLYWOOD, FLA.	\$6.1M	29.2K	5
5 TikTok Entertainment Centre	SYDNEY	\$5.5M	55.5K	9
6 SSE Arena	BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND	\$5.1M	81.5K	14
7 The Anthem	WASHINGTON, D.C.	\$3.5M	34.5K	11
8 Mohegan Sun Arena	UNCASVILLE, CONN.	\$2.7M	46.6K	9
9 Bill Graham Civic Auditorium	SAN FRANCISCO	\$2.1M	25.4K	4
10 Utilita Arena	CARDIFF, WALES	\$2M	27.5K	4

2,501-5,000 CAPACITY

Venue	Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1 Chicago Theatre	CHICAGO	\$7.3M	98.5K	33
2 Beacon Theatre	NEW YORK	\$5.6M	56.6K	22
3 Dr. Phillips Center, Walt Disney Theater	ORLANDO, FLA.	\$4.5M	46.9K	22
4 Broward Center for the Performing Arts, Au-Rene Theater	FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.	\$3.8M	40.4K	24
5 Eventim Apollo	LONDON	\$3.7M	49.3K	17
6 Fox Theatre	ATLANTA	\$3.1M	32.4K	8
7 Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre	ATLANTA	\$2.9M	35.9K	20
8 Providence Performing Arts Center	PROVIDENCE, R.I.	\$2.6M	40K	16
9 Altria Theater	RICHMOND, VA.	\$2.3M	31.2K	13
10 The Chelsea at The Cosmopolitan	LAS VEGAS	\$1.8M	14.5K	6

2,500 OR LESS CAPACITY

Venue	Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance	No. Of Shows
1 Ryman Auditorium	NASHVILLE	\$5.8M	65.6K	29
2 Carpenter Theatre at Dominion Energy Center	RICHMOND, VA.	\$1.8M	25.3K	18
3 Ruth Eckerd Hall	CLEARWATER, FLA.	\$1.3M	17.7K	14
4 DeVos Performance Hall	GRAND RAPIDS, MICH.	\$1.3M	26.4K	17
5 Olympia Theatre	DUBLIN	\$1.1M	23.6K	17
6 Parker Playhouse	FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.	\$1M	19.3K	23
7 Forum	MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA	\$914K	12.5K	7
8 Encore Theater at Wynn Las Vegas	LAS VEGAS	\$859K	7.3K	6
9 Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall	FORT MYERS, FLA.	\$841K	13.7K	13
10 Maxwell C. King Center for the Performing Arts	MELBOURNE, FLA.	\$808K	13.1K	13

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MUSIC AND MONEY



Old Songs, New Grammys

As interpolations become more common in new hits, there's debate over whether the creators of those earlier songs deserve recognition on music's biggest night

BY STEVE KNOPPER // ILLUSTRATION BY RAFAEL ALVAREZ

FOR ABOUT TWO WEEKS, Mike Chapman thought he had a Grammy Award nomination. A 1982 hit he co-wrote, Toni Basil's "Mickey," landed in song of the year hopeful "APT," a hit last year for Bruno Mars and Blackpink's Rosé. "I was very happy, of course," the prolific British songwriter says. "I love the record. It's fantastic."

Then, Chapman's publisher informed him

that, while "APT" may have been up for a Grammy, he was not.

"It doesn't make me angry. It doesn't bother me," Chapman says from his London home. "I gave up on the Grammys 40 years ago."

In 1979, Chapman and his collaborator, Nicky Chinn, wrote a song, "Kitty," for British power-pop band Racey. The duo then re-worked it into "Mickey" for Basil, a young singer who made it into an enduring smash.

More than 40 years later, "APT" interpolated its nursery-rhyme chorus to the point that you can't hear the new song without getting "Mickey" stuck in your head. "I knew it was a huge hit the minute I heard it," Chinn recalls.

Although Chinn and Chapman authorized the use and are listed as two of the 12 songwriters in the track's credits, they are casualties of a strict Recording Academy rule. Because the "Mickey" portion of "APT" is not, technically speaking, new, Chinn and Chapman are not eligible for the Grammy, despite receiving royalty payments as the creators of the song's central hook and feel.

The issue of songwriter credit doesn't come up much, as almost all Grammy categories reward the performer as opposed to the writer. When it does, the academy's rule about interpolating — and sampling — is nuanced. Songs that contain interpolations and samples have been eligible in Grammy songwriting categories since a 2014 rule change. Because song of the year is a songwriter category, the interpolation rule kicks in and leads to quirks like Mars and collaborators such as Philip Lawrence and Christopher Brody Brown being listed as nominees, but not Chinn and Chapman.

The issue may seem obscure, but it has come up more frequently in recent years as interpolations have become more prominent in pop music. In addition to "APT," Lady Gaga's song of the year nominee, "Abracadabra," interpolates Siouxsie & The Banshees' 1981 hit, "Spellbound," and Doecheii's nominated "Anxiety" does the same with Gotye's 2011 smash, "Somebody That I Used To Know," which itself sampled Brazilian composer Luis Bonfá's 1960s instrumental "Seville." Last year, Shaboozey's song of the year nominee, "A Bar Song (Tipsy)," interpolated J-Kwon's 2004 hip-hop single "Tipsy."

Justin Shukat, partner and president of music publishing at Primary Wave

"To gain attention, you need to grab a consumer right away. What better way to do that [than] by putting James Brown's 'I Feel Good' right in your face?"

—JUSTIN SHUKAT,
PRIMARY WAVE

Music, suggests the reason for the sudden prominence of interpolations has to do with TikTok and Instagram emphasizing familiar and easy-to-remember melodies. "People consume content for under three seconds. What are you hitting, usually, in that time? The hook," he says. "To gain attention, you need to grab a consumer right away. What better way to do that [than] by putting James Brown's 'I Feel Good' right in your face? People know that from the second they hear it. If you write a brand-new song, they don't know that. That is the change."

DMG Clearances president Deborah Mannis-Gardner adds that sampling and interpolating have become an "homage," and the kinds of artists who

might be eligible for Grammy song of the year nominations are "respectfully" clearing source material and paying the original artists. Regarding the Grammys, she says, "It's sad they don't get the acknowledgment."

The academy's position on crediting interpolated works comes down to a simple argument: Song of the year is for new songs from this year, not older songs of yesteryear. "Had I been a Grammy voter back then, I might have campaigned for 'Mickey' because I love that song," says Evan Bogart, a songwriter-publisher who is co-chair of the academy's Songwriters & Composers wing. "But I'm more sympathetic to the fact that 'Mickey' hadn't won a Grammy in its heyday, when that song came out as an original song in the first place." He adds: "The people creating those new works, the ones making those creative decisions in the studio, are what these awards are intended to honor."

The academy could conceivably update the rule, according to Bogart, just as the Grammys once allowed samples and interpolations solely in the best rap song category before changing its policy in 2014. "There's an involved process," says Bogart, who serves as CEO of Seeker Music, a publisher and music-rights company that owns a stake in J-Kwon's original "Tipsy." "These things are diligently discussed by people all over the industry, who have many different points of view, debated ad nauseam."

For Amy Birnbaum, senior A&R and artist relations director for publisher Round Hill Music, the debate over Grammys and interpolations comes down to one name: Bonfá. She says that including Bonfá — a bossa nova pioneer who was born in Santa Cruz, Brazil, in 1922 and became an accomplished classical guitarist and composer of film soundtrack classics such as 1959's "Manhã de Carnaval" — as a song of the year nominee for "Anxiety" could help educate Doecheii fans about his legacy. "He should be posthumously awarded a Grammy, and his family should be recognized with that honor," says Birnbaum, whose company represents Bonfá's catalog outside the United States. "There is no reason Luis Bonfá should not be recognized the way Doecheii should. We want people to celebrate and honor the original copyright holders."

For Chapman, losing out on the nomination is more personal. "It's odd, isn't it?" he says. "The people who gave you the inspiration in the first place are just struck off after the record is made." **b**

Sphere Entertainment announced plans to open a second Sphere venue just outside Washington, D.C.

Merlin signed a licensing deal with generative AI startup **Udio**.

LATE NIGHT SUNSETS MUSIC

Following news that *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* is reducing its number of musical acts per week, managers and labels are left with few options

I

N JAN. 5, the day bluegrass star Molly Tuttle performed "That's Gonna Leave a Mark" on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, news broke that the long-running ABC late-night talk show would reduce its number of weekly musical acts from five to two. Tuttle's name and image appeared in several news stories about the change — good press despite the bad news. "I'll take the windfall," says her manager, Kevin Spellman. "Unfortunately, what we have is a significant limitation on opportunities to expose your music to a national audience, particularly in the smaller genres."

Kimmel's music reduction, along with *Late Night With Seth Meyers* cutting its Fred Armisen-led house band in 2024, and CBS' cancellation of *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* kicking in in May, means *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* are the only major late-night shows continuing to emphasize live music. It's a cultural shift away from the all-powerful TV era when an appearance on Johnny Carson's or David Letterman's shows could singlehandedly break new stars, and it leaves the music industry flailing for big-swing promotional appearances.



Kimmel

"It's just making it harder and harder for us to find outlets outside of social media and radio to really reach a lot of people," says Brian Schwartz, manager of Dawes, which memorably covered The Beatles' "With a Little Help From My Friends" on *Kimmel* with guests Aloe Blacc and others in December to promote their benefit show for Southern California fire victims. "Late-night television, and TV in general, has become harder and harder. To take three nights away from us on yet another show, it's difficult."

Reps for *Kimmel* did not respond to inquiries, but the program's change in music over the last year reflects the diminishing power of late-night talk shows for artists — especially their initial airings on TV. In the 2000s, Letterman and his top rival, Jay Leno, frequently drew between 4 million and 6 million TV viewers nightly, while their successors averaged between 1.2 million and 2.5 million throughout 2025, according to Nielsen.

For artists, managers and labels, the dwindling promotional opportunities has meant tougher decisions:

Most talk shows do not pay for performances, and artists frequently must cover travel expenses as well as luxuries like makeup and wardrobe. Sources told *Billboard* in 2024 that such expenses can range from \$150,000 to \$225,000, or as high as \$700,000 for *SNL*. Traditionally,

labels have paid for the performances. Some labels, says a source who used to work on music in late-night TV, have recently insisted that the talk shows themselves cover these expenses — which may be one reason the programs are cutting back. "I imagine they're being much more careful," the source says. "Someone that could have a song on the [Billboard] Hot 100 isn't as attractive to bookers. Maybe they're only looking at the top 10."

For artists who've booked performances recently on top late-night shows, the payoff is still worth it. Tuttle's *Kimmel* appearance drew nearly 50,000 YouTube views and 4,500 likes on Instagram — not to mention what Spellman calls "cut-downs," or snippets and excerpts of the performance. "It's hard to measure exactly the impact on eyeballs and views on social platforms, but it is incredibly significant," he says. "That's the part that is a bummer, that we're going to miss out on."

The *Kimmel* cutback, as well as the loss of music on *Meyers* and the cancellation of *Colbert*, is a "blow to everybody — the artists, the labels, the teams, the show," Schwartz says. "It's just another kick in the marketing shins, so to speak."

—S.K.



From the artists who took the stage to the fans who filled the seats, thank you, *Billboard*, for recognizing Kaseya Center as 2026's Top East Coast Arena.

Kaseya Center

Atlantic Music Group promoted **Kevin Weaver** to president.

Warner Music Group named former *Billboard* editor-in-chief **Hannah Karp** chief communications officer.

BMI named **Todd Horvath** president/COO.

Maurice Slade was promoted to head of music at **SoundCloud**.

From The Desks Of... SIMON TIKHMAN & KEVIN "CHIEF" ZARUK

CO-FOUNDERS/CO-CEOs, THE CORE ENTERTAINMENT

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

THE CORE Entertainment's co-founders and co-CEOs, Simon Tikhman and Kevin "Chief" Zaruk, like to joke they were set up on a blind date by their mutual attorney. Zaruk was still at Nashville's Big Loud, where he was a founding partner, and Tikhman was a serial entrepreneur. "Our lawyer said, 'I think you guys have a skill set that could complement each other's. At the end of day, you should just meet,'" Zaruk recalls. "You'll probably get along and become friends."

The attorney was right on both counts, and a successful match was made. Shortly thereafter, in 2019 — and with Live Nation as a partner — the pair formed new management company The Core Entertainment. (They decline to say how much Live Nation, which provides shared services such as HR, owns of their company.) When they started, Tikhman and Zaruk shared one desk, sitting side by side, in a one-room office. They have now expanded to 30 employees with expansive offices in Los Angeles and Nashville.

The Core's management roster numbers more than a dozen artists, including Bailey Zimmerman, who heads out on his first arena tour in February; Country Music Association award-winning duo Dan + Shay; and Nate Smith, whose 2023 smash, "World on Fire," spent 10 weeks at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart in 2024, tying a record with



Morgan Wallen's "You Proof." Other artists they handle include hot country newcomers Cameron Whitecomb and Josh Ross, as well as rock stalwarts Nickelback, whom fellow Canadian Zaruk has worked with since 1998. The *Billboard* Country Power Players vets also represent writers and produc-

ers, including King Henry, who was nominated for a Grammy for his work on Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. In 2023, the pair launched The Core Records with Universal Music Group. Among their releases was the 19-track *Nobody Wants This* season-two soundtrack in November, in conjunction with

Interscope, featuring original songs from Selena Gomez, Chris Stapleton and FINNEAS. (Tikhman's wife, Erin Foster, created the Netflix comedy, which is loosely based on her courtship with Tikhman.) Sitting in their Los Angeles office in the Live Nation complex

in Beverly Hills in late January, Tikhman and Zaruk discuss the intricacies of building careers these days, given that artists "are under a microscope" because of social media and unrealistic expectations. "Nobody's built for this," Zaruk says.

What was the key to making Bailey Zimmerman an arena headliner after just two albums?

ZARUK His growth has happened very quickly, but it also feels like this was the exact right time for this move. We didn't force it. His going out on the stadium tours [opening for] Morgan [Wallen] and developing a show was step one. And then step two [was] starting to headline fairs and festivals. Even though it's a built-in audience, you're still able to track what the value is. Is the thirst there from the fans? You can tell day by day what you're selling, so we're able to map it out in a way of being able to be safe and know when we can make this jump.

How important was Zimmerman's feature on BigXthaPlug's "All the Way," which reached No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100?

ZARUK Massive. Not only did his own personal numbers grow as far as streams and socials and followers, but the opportunities that came out of it. Also getting played on a different radio format, the rhythmic format; getting put on playlists that you would just never, ever get. And I think the crazy truth of all that is nobody knew it. Everyone put up their hand and was like, "Oh, this is going to be really cool," [but] nobody on this planet thought that song was going to be one of the top songs of the year.

TIKHMAN BigX put it on his Instagram. One post and it just went. You can think about all the plans in the world, and then the artist posts an unfinished version and there it goes.

The Core offers 10 free sessions a year with a therapist, life coach or business coach. What results have you had from that implementation?

TIKHMAN The biggest thing that I've seen that's tangible with some of our employees that have done the coaching is patience in communication. I've seen employees [go], "OK, I'm going to take this information, I'm going to dissect it, I'm going to think about it, and then I'm going to come to Chief and Simon with a real response that isn't impulsive." We always joke we're not in *The Pitt*. We're not performing heart surgery. No one is dying, so let's be more mindful of our conversations. We don't need to respond in five seconds.

For the last few years, coastal labels have been signing country talent. As managers, how do you decide between a coastal label and a Nashville label for one of your acts?

ZARUK A lot of people would probably say it depends on the

they never wavered. You see a lot of artists that just chase trends and it becomes not authentic and the fans don't believe it. When you know who you are, what you are, your brand, your music, [you] believe in it and then go sell it. They were Nickelback from day one. They never changed.

For the last few years, coastal labels have been signing country talent. As managers, how do you decide between a coastal label and a Nashville label for one of your acts?

ZARUK If you're going to take a stance, then you'd better be very educated on why you're taking that stance and why you feel like you need to. We're never going to tell an artist what they can

"You see a lot of artists that just chase trends and it becomes not authentic and the fans don't believe it. When you know who you are, what you are, your brand, your music, [you] believe in it and then go sell it."

—Zaruk

What can young acts learn about longevity from a band like Nickelback, who Chief has worked with for nearly 30 years?

TIKHMAN I'll ask Chief: How many shows has Nickelback ever canceled?

ZARUK Next to none.

TIKHMAN Consistency is so important. This is your job. If you say yes to something, you're going to go to it on time and you're going to be a professional. Inconsistency for young artists is where they can meet their demise when people don't know what they're going to get. But with Chad [Kroeger] and the guys, you know what you're going to get when you see them: a professional, incredible show. And when they're there to work, they work.

TIKHMAN BigX put it on his Instagram. One post and it just went. You can think about all the plans in the world, and then the artist posts an unfinished version and there it goes.

Nate Smith recently put on a MAGA hat a fan threw onstage and then later posted that it was his "proudest moment" to speak out on his beliefs. What advice do you give when an artist wants to get political?

artist. For example, if you have [neo-traditionalist] Zach Top, you're probably less worried about a coastal label right now. You want to break in country, and you want the country label to do all the things like [play] the Grand Ole Opry that are really ingrained in the community. There is definitely value to that. But if you have an act like a Megan Moroney or what Ella [Langley] is doing or Bailey, where you start being like, "Is this a global artist where we can do features with BigX?" BigX's [duet] came from [Zimmerman's label] Atlantic. That does not happen from a Nashville label.

What does The Core look like in five years?

TIKHMAN Chief and I have always said from day one that this company is way bigger than just the genre, and we're looking at artists in different genres all the time. It's not just country. We want to be global and that means musically, too. Cam Whitcomb is this kid who's going to be able to play Stagecoach and Lollapalooza, and I think he's a real window into where we're trying to spread our wings. ■

Clive Davis Pre-Grammy Gala

Inside the annual star-studded event on Grammys Eve

BY LYNDSEY HAVENS PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIEL PRAKOPCYK



The 2026 Pre-Grammy Gala class photo, taken Jan. 31 at The Beverly Hilton in L.A. Back row, from left: Monte Lipman, Harvey Mason Jr., sombr, Darren Criss, Pusha T, Malice, mgk, Shay Mooney, John Legend and Dan Smyers. Front row, from left: Rei Ami, EJAE, Audrey Nuna, Olivia Dean, Laufey, Avery Lipman, Art Garfunkel, Rickey Minor, Clive Davis, Jennifer Hudson, Jelly Roll, Gayle King and Alex Warren.



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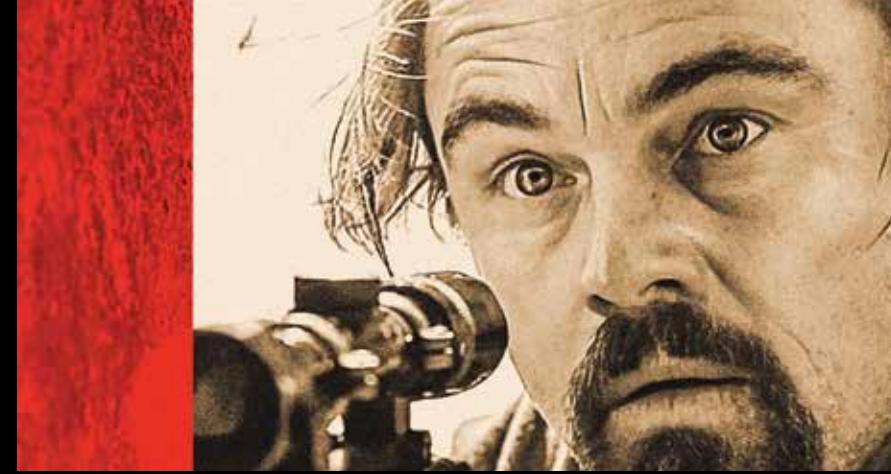


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**Oscar Music
Preview 2026**
BY PAUL GREIN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARA OCEJO

Sinners made history when the nominations for the 98th annual Academy Awards were announced Jan. 22. The Ryan Coogler-directed blockbuster received a record 16 nods, beating the old record of 14 shared by *All About Eve*, *Titanic* and *La La Land*. *Sinners* is the only film from 2025 to land nominations in both music categories — best original song (for “I Lied to You” by Raphael Saadiq and Ludwig Göransson) and best original score (for Göransson).

One Battle After Another, which amassed the second most nominations with 13, and *Frankenstein*, which tied *Marty Supreme* and *Sentimental Value* for third place with nine, are also represented in the best original score category by Jonny Greenwood and Alexandre Desplat, respectively.

But the members of the music branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences didn’t just focus on heavily nominated films: Compositions from the music documentaries *Diane Warren: Relentless* and *Viva Verdi!* received nominations for best original song, which are those films’ only nods.

The Oscars will air live on ABC on March 15 at 7 p.m. ET/4 p.m. PT. Conan O’Brien will host for the second year in a row.



Best Original Song

The members of the music branch could hardly have selected a more diverse field of nominees in this category. The chosen songs include (in alphabetical order below) an emotional power ballad, an effervescent K-pop smash, an authentic Southern blues number, an operatic aria and a haunting acoustic folk song.

“Dear Me”

DIANE WARREN: RELENTLESS
(MASTERCLASS/GREENWICH ENTERTAINMENT)
Music and lyric by Diane Warren

This is the ninth consecutive year that Warren has been nominated in this category — an unprecedented feat. The previous record of eight consecutive nominations was set by Sammy Cahn, who made it every year from 1954 to 1961 — a streak that started before Warren was born.

Warren has received 17 nominations in this category, which puts her third on the all-time leaderboard behind just Cahn (26) and Johnny Mercer (18). Making that

achievement even more impressive: Warren has rarely been part of an Oscar-magnet film that swept the nominations. “Dear Me” is her 12th nominated song that originated in a film that received no other nods.

The end-title song sung by Kesha in *Diane Warren: Relentless* draws on what Warren would tell her younger self. “I was a lonely, misunderstood, bullied kid that spent a lot of time in my room by myself when I wasn’t being kicked out of school or things like that,” she told *Billboard* hours after learning of her latest nomination. “What I wanted to do was tell that young girl sitting in a room and picking up a guitar and maybe writing her first song that, ‘You don’t know it now, but you’re going to be all right.’”

"GOLDEN"

KPOP DEMON HUNTERS (NETFLIX)
Music and lyric by EJAE, Mark Sonnenblick, Joong Gyu Kwak, Yu Han Lee, Hee Dong Nam, Jeong Hoon Seon and Teddy Park

"Golden," which won best original song at both the Critics Choice Awards and the Golden Globes, appears to be the front-runner in this category. The smash by HUNTR/X, the fictional trio whose singing voices are provided by EJAE (Rumi), Audrey Nuna (Mira) and REI AMI (Zoey), topped the Billboard Hot 100 for eight nonconsecutive weeks. It's the first song since Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling!" from *Trolls* in 2017 to reach No. 1 and subsequently land an Oscar nod. ("Shallow" from *A Star Is Born* hit No. 1 only after its Oscar win.)

The academy has a rule that it will present no more than four Oscar statuettes in this category. If there are more than four credited writers, the writers must sign an agreement that they will share one statuette if they

win. The seven writers of "Golden" signed such an agreement.

"Golden" tied the all-time Oscar record as the song with the most nominated songwriters. The Counting Crows hit "Accidentally in Love" from *Shrek 2*, which was nominated in 2005, was also the work of seven songwriters.

The "Golden" co-writers (except for American-born Sonnenblick) are the first South Korean-born songwriters to be nominated since Yeah Yeah Yeahs' Karen O, who was cited in 2014 for co-writing "The Moon Song" from *Her*.

"I LIED TO YOU"

SINNERS (WARNER BROS.)
Music and lyric by Raphael Saadiq and Ludwig Göransson

This is the second nomination in this category for both songwriters. Saadiq was nominated in 2018 for co-writing "Mighty River" from *Mudbound*; Göransson in 2023 for co-writing "Lift Me Up" from *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.

Sinners is the third consecutive

Coogler film that has spawned a best original song nominee following *Black Panther* ("All the Stars" in 2019) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* ("Lift Me Up" in 2023).

Miles Caton, who plays Samuel "Sammie" Moore (aka "Preacherboy") in the film, sings "I Lied to You" on the soundtrack. Caton co-wrote another *Sinners* song, "Last Time (I Seen the Sun)," which was shortlisted in this category.

"I Lied to You" is also nominated for best song written for visual media at the 2026 Grammy Awards, along with two other *Sinners* songs — "Pale, Pale Moon" and the title track. *Sinners* is just the third film to produce three or more nominees in this Grammy category following *Waiting To Exhale* (three nods in 1997) and *Barbie* (four nods in 2024).

"SWEET DREAMS OF JOY"

VIVA VERDI! (VIVA VERDI!)
Music and lyric by Nicholas Pike

This is the first nomination for Pike, an English film/TV composer who has

been active since 1987.

Viva Verdi! shines a light on the elderly opera singers and musicians who live in Milan's Casa Verdi retirement home. Pike, who also scored the film, wrote "Sweet Dreams of Joy" based on a 12-minute snippet of the documentary sent to him by producer Christine La Monte. "It was so inspiring. It was so full of humanity and music and energy that I literally walked over to the piano and wrote the piece without any thought of [whether it] would it end up in the film," he told *Billboard*. "It was just so moving I had to write the piece. The lyrics took me a little longer to finesse, but, really, it was just pure inspiration."

Pike found the process of writing "Sweet Dreams of Joy" so rewarding that he has written more arias for upcoming films. He is also entertaining the idea of writing an opera that he hopes could appeal to a younger audience.

Puerto Rican soprano Ana María Martínez sang the aria after the original singer came down with bronchitis.

"TRAIN DREAMS"

TRAIN DREAMS (NETFLIX)
Music by Nick Cave and Bryce Dessner; lyric by Nick Cave

This is the first Oscar nod for both Cave, the leader of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, which has released 18 studio albums since 1984, and Dessner, guitarist in The National, which has released 10 studio albums since 2001. Bryce Dessner is the twin brother of Aaron Dessner, a founding member of The National, whose outside activities include work with Taylor Swift.

Train Dreams is such a minimalist film that director Clint Bentley and Dessner, who scored the film, questioned if it even needed a song. Cave was Bentley's first choice to write the lyrics and perform the song — a choice that Dessner seconded. "He's obviously a huge hero of mine, of my band, and someone we've listened to forever," Dessner told *Billboard*. "It was not something I had imagined doing because how would we get to him?" But it turns out that Cave was a fan of the 2011 novella of the same name that the film is based on, about a railroad laborer who suffers a great loss.

Cave is the third songwriter from Australia to be nominated in this category following John Farrar, for writing "Helplessly Devoted to You" from *Grease*, and Peter Allen, for co-writing "Arthur's Theme (Best That You Can Do)" from *Arthur*, which won.

Best Original Score

Alexandre Desplat and Ludwig Göransson are both two-time winners in this category. If either wins, they would become the first three-time winner in this category in this century. Jonny Greenwood and Jerskin Fendrix are both previous nominees in this category. This is the first nod for Max Richter. Who's missing? For the first time in 11 years, no American composers are nominated; and for the first time in three years, no women composers are nominated.

BUGONIA

FOCUS FEATURES Jerskin Fendrix

The English composer-musician is best known for writing the scores to three films directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and starring Emma Stone — *Poor Things* (2023), *Kinds of Kindness* (2024) and *Bugonia* (2025). For both *Poor Things* and *Bugonia*, composer, director and star all received Oscar nods. (Stone won her second best actress award for *Poor Things*.) *Kinds of Kindness* didn't land with Oscar voters, receiving no nods.

In addition to his soundtrack work, Fendrix has released two solo studio albums, *Winterreise* (2020) and *Once Upon a Time in Shropshire* (2025), and one live album, *Live at Cafe OTO* (2021). Lanthimos commissioned Fendrix to write the score for *Poor Things* after hearing *Winterreise*. It was Fendrix's first film score.

After composing the score for *Bugonia*, Fendrix conducted and recorded the 90-piece London Contemporary Orchestra in a single room at AIR Studios in London. Milan Records released the soundtrack on Oct. 31, 2025.

This was one of four nods the film received, along with best picture, best actress for Stone and best adapted screenplay for Will Tracy. Fun fact: Fendrix made cameo appearances in *Poor Things* and *Kinds of Kindness*.

FRANKENSTEIN

NETFLIX Alexandre Desplat

This is Desplat's 12th nomination for best original score, which puts him in a tie with Hans Zimmer for third place on the list of living composers with the most nominations in score categories. They trail only John Williams (who has amassed an astounding 49 nods in score categories) and Thomas Newman (14).

This is the third time the French composer has scored a film directed by Guillermo del Toro. They previously teamed on *The Shape of Water* (for which they both won Oscars) and *Pinocchio*. Desplat considers *Frankenstein* the "third movement of the triptych" with del Toro. "They are all about the creatures and

being able to receive love, to give love and create empathy, so there's some kind of line going through these three scores and these three movies," he told *Billboard*.

To represent humanity in *Frankenstein*, Desplat chose "the smallest, tiniest, most beautiful and most difficult instrument, which is the violin," he says. "We wanted to avoid the obvious, avoid the horror film, avoid the scary and we knew that we needed to be touched, moved by the creature. Very early on, we spoke about using a string instrument because the creature is a huge thing and we need to have a counterpoint."

HAMNET

FOCUS FEATURES Max Richter

First-time Oscar nominee Richter is a classically trained, German-born British composer-pianist. He has recorded nine solo albums and has received two Grammy nominations — best score soundtrack for visual media for *Ad Astra* and best music video as a featured artist on Woodkid's "The Golden Age."

This was one of eight nods *Hamnet* received. The Chloé Zhao-directed film looks at William Shakespeare and wife Agnes' courtship, marriage and subsequent death of a child that led Shakespeare to write *Hamlet*.

Richter told *Billboard* he was deliberately "very sparing" in his musical choices to let the "powerful, very emotional material speak on its own terms without trying to direct us as the audience in any particular way." He also brought in renowned Renaissance choir *Tenebrae*, "but I transformed those vocal recordings in the computer into a sort of haunted, ghostly version."

For all the dark topics that *Hamnet* addresses, Richter says working on the movie was a joyous experience. "It really is a special project to me because very often you may work on a film and the film will turn out great, but the project was a nightmare, right? That was not the case with *Hamnet*. The vibes on that set were just amazing."

ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER

WARNER BROS. Jonny Greenwood

One Battle After Another is the sixth consecutive Paul Thomas Anderson film that Greenwood has scored following *There Will Be Blood*, *The Master*, *Inherent Vice*, *Phantom Thread* (which earned Greenwood his first Oscar nod) and *Licorice Pizza*.

Greenwood received his second Oscar nod for scoring Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*. This is his third. Greenwood, the lead guitarist in Radiohead, has now received as many Oscar nominations for best original score as Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, the mainstays of fellow rock titans Nine Inch Nails, who have been nominated for *The Social Network*, *Mank* and *Soul* (winning for *The Social Network* and *Soul*).

Greenwood was involved with *One Battle After Another* since its inception. The English composer wrote music based on the script and played to the finished film during production. The score was recorded with the London Contemporary Orchestra, conducted by Hugh Brunt. It was released by Nonesuch Records on Sept. 26, 2025, the same day as the film's release on digital platforms. The album was released on CD and vinyl on Nov. 14.

All tracks on the soundtrack album were solely written by Greenwood, except "Mean Alley," which he co-wrote with his Radiohead bandmate Thom Yorke.

SINNERS

WARNER BROS. Ludwig Göransson

Göransson's music for *Sinners* won best original score at both the Critics Choice Awards and the Golden Globes, making it the apparent front-runner in this category. This is Göransson's third Oscar nod for best original score. He was previously nominated (and won) for *Black Panther* and *Oppenheimer*. Göransson is also nominated for best original song. It's the first time he has been nominated in both categories in the same year.

The Swedish composer has scored all five of director Ryan Coogler's films — *Fruitvale Station*, *Creed*, *Black Panther*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *Sinners*. Coogler and Göransson, who met in college at the University of Southern California, worked together on developing the music for *Sinners*. During preproduction, the director sent his composer several recordings from the 1930s and early 1940s, particularly the works of Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson.

Sony Music released two *Sinners* albums (even though the film was distributed by Warner Bros.). *Sinners (Original Motion Picture Score)* contains Göransson's score and features Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich and blues/rock guitarist Eric Gales on individual tracks. *Sinners (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)* features songs from the film performed by such musicians as Rhiannon Giddens, Buddy Guy and Brittany Howard, along with castmates. The albums were released on Sony Classical Records and Sony Masterworks, respectively, on April 18, 2025, the same day the film was released.

Additional reporting by Melinda Newman.



Global Power Players

On March 7, *Billboard* will publish its annual Global Power Players Issue. This issue will profile leaders in the music industry from the United States and international who are executives at record labels, music publishers, talent agencies and in live entertainment to recognize their achievements.

Advertise and congratulate this year's Global Power Players to reach an influential audience of decision-makers worldwide.

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As artists start their own run clubs, F1 and FIFA link up with pop's biggest names and the NBA MVP and R&B stars share a maverick manager, the link between sports and music is stronger than ever

THE — SPORTS — ISSUE

THE SPORTS ISSUE

FAMILY FIRST

ISLA Management's **SIMON GEBRELUL** has turned organic relationships into a wide-ranging roster, led by NBA MVP **SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER** and R&B star **GIVEON**

BY CARL LAMARRE PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIWANG VALDEZ



From left: Gebrelul, Gilgeous-Alexander and GIVEON photographed on Dec. 20, 2025, at Paycom Center in Oklahoma City.

IT'S MERE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, AND PAYCOM CENTER IS UNUSUALLY QUIET.

The arena — home of the Oklahoma City Thunder, the reigning 2025 NBA champions — typically holds 18,000 roaring fans, but today, you could hear a pin drop. Yet even in silence, the Thunder's accomplishments speak loudly. Division title banners hang proudly from the rafters. Scan past those banners and across the empty arena, and three words in bold orange and blue come into focus: *Committed. Community. Together.*

That trifecta isn't just the glue that keeps the Thunder ahead of the competition — it's the ethos of Simon Gebrelul's ISLA Management. Since launching ISLA in 2018, Gebrelul and his co-founder, EK, have proved that a powerhouse management company can be built on a foundation of friendship — at least when the friends in question are some of the biggest stars in sports and music today, including Thunder superstar and reigning NBA MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Grammy Award-nominated, multiplatinum singer GIVĒON.

"My clients are my friends," says Gebrelul, 34. "I met some of them playing video games early on when I was 16, 17, 18. You go hard for the people you care about. I've gotten in front of huge companies and burned relationships because I was standing up for clients. When you love them that much, the relationship with whatever brand doesn't matter. I'm going to live or die on the sword with my client. You lose that when you try to become more of a company than a family."

An avid sports fan, Gebrelul always dreamed of working in the NBA. He managed basketball players independently in the mid-2010s on a day-to-day basis but felt pulled toward something more. "[Basketball] was my first love," Gebrelul says. "That's where I started a lot of my business relationships. But I always had an admiration for the music space. I had friends

way, you can bring the best of both worlds together."

Gebrelul met Gilgeous-Alexander in 2016, when he was just a teenager with hoop dreams playing at Hamilton Heights Christian Academy, a high school with a nationally recognized basketball program in Tennessee. Their first in-person meeting occurred when Gilgeous-Alexander was representing Team Canada during the FIBA Americas U18 Championship. Finding that they shared both lofty ambitions and a fondness for childlike humor, their bond deepened over time when they started working together during his rookie year with the Los Angeles Clippers. A turning point for Gilgeous-Alexander's career came in 2019, when he was traded from the Clippers to the Thunder — and morphed into a full-fledged superstar.

Last year, Gilgeous-Alexander — long known in NBA circles simply as "SGA" — had a historic season. The four-time All-Star won his first MVP award after leading the Thunder to a league-best 68 wins, a franchise record. His nimbleness and lethal midrange skills helped him average 32.7 points per game en route to an NBA championship and his first scoring title.

As he racked up those accolades over the past year, Gilgeous-Alexander has quietly redefined how a reserved athlete (albeit one with modelesque presence) playing in one of the nation's smallest markets can position themselves in mainstream media. In tandem with his client's rise in the NBA, Gebrelul says he took a "highly intentional and carefully curated approach" to building his off-court portfolio, staying "disciplined in our willingness to say no" and securing brand partnerships for Gilgeous-Alexander with everyone from AT&T and Converse to Audemars Piguet and YSL Beauty.

"I'm 27 years old. There's a lot of games to be played, a lot of game to be learned," Gilgeous-Alexander says. "That's my motivation. I would be wasting the opportunity if I didn't see how good at this game I could become. Wherever that takes me, it takes me. It's taken me places so far, I'd say."

Athletic excellence has translated to impact off the court for Gilgeous-Alexander, who's now a part-owner of the newly renovated TD Coliseum in his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. Following a renovation led by Oak View Group, the venue reopened in November with a concert by Paul McCartney and currently hosts both concerts and home games for the professional box lacrosse team the Toronto Rock. As a kid, Gilgeous-Alexander used to travel to Toronto with his younger brother and mother to attend concerts; now, he has helped to bring mainstream music back to Hamilton itself as an investor in the venue, with artists like Nine Inch Nails, Charlie Puth and GIVĒON slated to perform there this year. Last August, Hamilton offered its prodigal son the key to the city and named a street in his honor.

"Music has always been a huge part of my life," Gilgeous-Alexander says. "I want this arena to be a place where artists feel excited to come through, where fans don't have to leave the city for world-class shows, where some of my friends who are musicians can perform and where we're truly investing back into the local economy. This is about creating opportuni-

"I'M GOING TO LIVE OR DIE ON THE SWORD WITH MY CLIENT. YOU LOSE THAT WHEN YOU TRY TO BECOME MORE OF A COMPANY THAN A FAMILY."

- GEBRELUL

making music at the highest levels, and artists and producers would lean on me for advice for their music and beats. I saw a lane on the music business side, so I entered that world first."

With a roster of just music clients initially, Gebrelul has led with a family-first approach — he's never recruited clients, nor does he plan to. In fact, he and EK met through a mutual friend at a party in 2017. At the time, EK worked in banking, and she saw that while Gebrelul "had all the tools to be great," he needed "a bit more structure and formality in how he was operating." She quit her job to co-found ISLA with him, and now sees the value in its family atmosphere. "Simon forced me to look at things through his lens by leading with love, compassion and doing things for the people you love," EK says. "Sometimes that means putting them ahead of yourself, and sometimes even ahead of the business."

"Sports and music are huge parts of the culture," says Gebrelul, sitting alongside Gilgeous-Alexander and GIVĒON center court at Paycom. "There's so much overlap in both of those worlds. It's not easy to make them coexist all the time. Sometimes it comes across inorganic, but if you do it the right

STYLING BY YOSHUA SIMMONS. BARBER: NOE HABIB. HAIR: BONIKA GOMBER. GROOMING: TEREZIA LILZ. ON SITE PRODUCER: LAELA ZAHEH





ties and putting Hamilton on the map in a bigger way."

ISLA's influence, too, extends well beyond the hardwood. In 2018, Gebrelul met R&B artist GIVÉON at the home of his longtime collaborator Sevn Thomas, a producer who also happened to be a Gebrelul client. Known for his baritone voice and understated bravado, the musician immediately stood out to Gebrelul, EK and Gilgeous-Alexander, who was present the night they all met.

At the time, GIVÉON was working as a server at Bubba Gump Shrimp in Long Beach, Calif., and walking dogs while quietly honing his craft alongside Thomas. With Gebrelul in the fold, GIVÉON continued to work toward his breakthrough opportunity — and his patience paid off when, in 2019, he landed a deal with Epic Records; in March 2020, he appeared on Drake's "Chicago Freestyle," which became his first Billboard Hot 100 entry.

Even amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, his career quickly picked up momentum: His 2020 single "Heartbreak Anniversary" became his first top 20 Hot 100 hit as a solo artist, and he secured his first chart-topper in 2021 as a featured artist on Justin Bieber's "Peaches."

Last July, GIVÉON released his second album, *Beloved*, debuting at No. 8 on the Billboard 200. A deeply felt R&B album rooted in heartbreak, solace and hope, for which Thomas produced on every track, the project was inspired in large part by the work of iconic Philadelphia Sound pioneers and production duo Gamble and Huff. *Beloved* was nominated for a best R&B album Grammy, and last November GIVÉON sold out New York's Madison Square Garden.

"I used to always tell the story of how I was a server, but now I've been in music longer than I was a server, so I can't even say

"WE'VE GONE INTO DEALS AND SIMON WILL THINK HIGHER THAN WHAT I WOULD THINK ABOUT MYSELF, AND I'M A VERY CONFIDENT DUDE."

—GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

that story anymore," says GIVÉON, now 30. "I used to be like, 'Can you believe that it worked out?' Now it's like, 'Bro, you can't keep saying that story. We all know it worked!'"

He's now one among many marquee names in hip-hop and R&B on the ISLA roster, along with producers and songwriters like Thomas, Boi-1da, OZ, Jahaan Sweet and, in his capacity as a producer-songwriter, Grammy winner Leon Thomas (who just took home two awards as an artist at the 2026 ceremony). OZ earned a No. 2 debut on the Hot 100 with Drake's "What Did I Miss?"

"Those guys are massive hit-makers in their own regard," Gebrelul says of that pool of behind-the-scenes talent. "We manage a really special group and they're obviously a lot more low maintenance. They're at the point in their careers where they can be selective with who they work with, which is probably the No. 1 blessing as a producer."

And with ISLA thriving in both sports and music, Gebrelul feels like his own blessings are coming together. "In my first year of music, I got *Forbes* 30 Under 30 and *Billboard* 40 Under 40," Gebrelul says. "Even though my first love was sports, I'm now able to exist in these worlds simultaneously — and at the perfect time."

SHAI AND GIVÉON, HOW HAS SIMON HELPED SHAPE NOT JUST YOUR CAREERS, BUT THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT CAREER LONGEVITY AND LEGACY?

GIVÉON When I met Simon and Sevn Thomas, I was still a server. I was kind of antsy about everything when it came to deals and how everything worked. I wanted to do things right away. The biggest thing Simon taught me about longevity was building up your leverage. That comes with quality, being patient and having some business acumen, too.

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER Simon came to my life as a friend first, and our relationship was organic. I had an approach on the court that I hadn't really homed in with longevity and being professional. He showed me how to take that approach on the business side of life. From there, everything skyrocketed. He unlocked a bunch of doors that I hadn't even seen. He changed my life.

GIVÉON He's a wizard.

SIMON, WHAT'S THE HARDEST PART OF MANAGING SUPERSTARDOM ACROSS TWO INDUSTRIES WHERE THE PRESSURE, PACE AND PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS SOMETIMES DIFFER?

GEBRELUL It's two different types of pressure. In Shai's field, he's on the court and that's where his results come from. I can't really [influence] that. Whereas in GIVÉON's world, it's more subjective. You got to have more input. You got to think about your rollout, the creative and how the songs sound because music is subjective. Your whole circle at the table can say, "This is a perfect album," but if the world doesn't receive it like that, there's nothing we can do.

Both [Shai and GIVÉON] make it real easy by being amazing at what they do. They love their craft.

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER I'd think it would be easier for Simon because [for him] it's the same standard to reach success no matter what you're doing, and he holds you to that. We've gone into deals and Simon will think higher than what I would think about myself, and I'm a very confident dude.

GIVÉON [When it came to my record deal], I thought it was a nice number and then [Simon] 10x'd it. That's why I'm also able to take time with my creative process, because we don't say yes to anything and everything. We're financially healthy.

GIVÉON, YOU'VE CHECKED MAJOR CAREER BOXES ALREADY, FROM EARNING MULTIPLE GRAMMY NOMINATIONS TO SELLING OUT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN. FROM A COMPETITIVE STANDPOINT, WHAT STILL DRIVES YOU?

GIVÉON I want to do a full arena tour. That's one of the main things that drives me, just because the quality of the show could be higher for each and every city. The MSG show, we added a couple more pieces, so I want everyone to get the same experience all across the board. And I want a Grammy. Please. I'm at eight nominations now. I would like one, please. (Laughs.) (GIVEON lost out in the best R&B album category to his ISLA mate Thomas.)

GEBRELUL Shai actually met GIVÉON the same time we did. He was a rookie on the [Los Angeles] Clippers. Me, Shai and EK were chilling and were about to pull up at Sevn's house. I think Shai just finished a game and GIVÉON was there and that ascension kind of happened at the same time. Shai was a rookie in the NBA, and Giv was [starting out] too.

Also, he was one of the artists that I called "COVID babies." There's a couple of artists that popped during COVID that didn't have a live experience. His first festival performance was Lollapalooza, main stage. He kind of had to jump right into the

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deep end with Lollapalooza, Wireless, Coachella and Met Gala. It was a quick ascension.

SHAI, YOU JUST HAD THE KIND OF SEASON MOST PLAYERS CHASE THEIR ENTIRE CAREERS, WINNING MVP, AN NBA CHAMPIONSHIP AND FINALS MVP. HOW DO YOU STAY MOTIVATED AFTER A YEAR LIKE THAT, AND WHAT'S LEFT FOR YOU TO CHASE?

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER I always say this: When I was a kid, I picked up a basketball to see how good I could become. My goals and aspirations were on a list — and were things that happened along the way — but my final [goal] has always been seeing what I can become. I'd like to think I'm far from that.

YOU'VE DRAWN MICHAEL JORDAN COMPARISONS OVER THE PAST YEAR BECAUSE OF YOUR STYLE OF PLAY AND SUCCESS. HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE WEIGHT OF THOSE COMPARISONS WITH YOUR DESIRE TO DEFINE YOUR OWN LEGACY?

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER I'd be lying if I said it wasn't flattering. Being in conversations with a guy like that — who is the face of basketball — is pretty insane. Honestly speaking, I don't really love them just because he's three-peated twice, what he did for the sneaker business — and everything he's been to the game — I think it's a disservice to compare me seven years in to what he's been. So, I don't love them, but I appreciate them. That's what I'm after, that's what I'm chasing, and that's what I'm striving for.

WHAT DOES BEING ONE OF THE BEST IN R&B AND MUSIC LOOK LIKE FOR YOU RIGHT NOW, GIVÉON?

GIVÉON As much as there's similarities between sports and music, that's one of the things I don't compare. I look at it more like a garden — there's different types of flowers that are there. Some flowers are going to be bigger than others; it's just a different thing, especially knowing that my sound is just a cocktail of all the music I grew up listening to.

People are comparing my upbringing to someone else's upbringing and my personal stories to someone else's stories. So, I don't actually rank [myself], but there are technical abilities that you could rank, like how well you put on a show, how well you tell a story [and] your uniqueness. I will say if we're going off technical and not just subjectiveness, I feel like I rank among the top.

"I'M ABLE TO TAKE TIME WITH MY CREATIVE PROCESS BECAUSE WE DON'T SAY YES TO EVERYTHING. WE'RE FINANCIALLY HEALTHY."

- GIVÉON

SIMON, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT R&B TODAY?

GEBRELUL I feel like there's been a resurgence in R&B — not to dis the genre because I don't think it's ever been dead. I don't even like when they say, "R&B is back." Objectively speaking, there's been a resurgence the last couple of years. I think it's in a great space. So many great, foundational R&B artists. Some of the older artists are still dropping music that resonates with a lot of people. A lot of artists are dipping into R&B and are dropping R&B projects that aren't R&B artists first, like Drake with the [*Some Sexy Songs 4 U*] album. Then, you have a lot of new R&B artists on [the come up]. Accessibility is at an all-time

high. You can get a mic and make crazy melodies and you're an R&B artist at that point, right?

WHO WAS ON YOUR PLAYLIST IN 2025, SHAI?

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER I listen to four artists religiously: Giv, Drake, [Lil] Yachty and Justin Bieber. Two rappers and two singers. Those are my defaults. And then I just mix rappers in every now and then. If we're on the plane, the vibes are a little different. So I have to work the room and not just play what I want to play. (*Laughs*.)

GEBRELUL Shai and GIVÉON are very notorious for being early on artists. That's what I appreciate most. Shai's list is super mainstream, but he has that layer of him like Giv. They'll listen to artists, and we're like, "Who's that?" Three months later, [they blow up].

SIMON, WHAT WAS THE PREPARATION LIKE ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS WHEN GIVÉON WAS ON TOUR AND SHAI WAS GEARING UP FOR AN NBA SEASON?

GEBRELUL It was a lot. We do a great job of staying together. I remember during the Western Conference Finals [in May 2025], and Giv had his *Billboard* playback in New York. EK stayed with Giv. I was [in Oklahoma City] the day Shai won Western Conference Finals MVP. I couldn't miss that moment. We do a good job of trying to be everywhere together but also realizing that Giv is an artist — he moves around a lot. He has a great team that corresponds with us on the highest level and if there's any type of hiccup, it gets corrected right away. Shai is a hooper, so he has his literal team around him. So it's not like we have to be there in that regard.

WHAT'S THE TOUGHEST INTERNAL BATTLE EACH OF YOU HAS FACED IN YOUR CAREERS SO FAR, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

GIVÉON I can start by saying how the ascension was so quick. I was always aware of my ability and talent, but as I started to break through that ceiling, at a certain point it becomes impostor syndrome. You have to walk around like, "Yeah, I can sell out MSG in presale"; otherwise, you're going to make yourself smaller than you actually are.

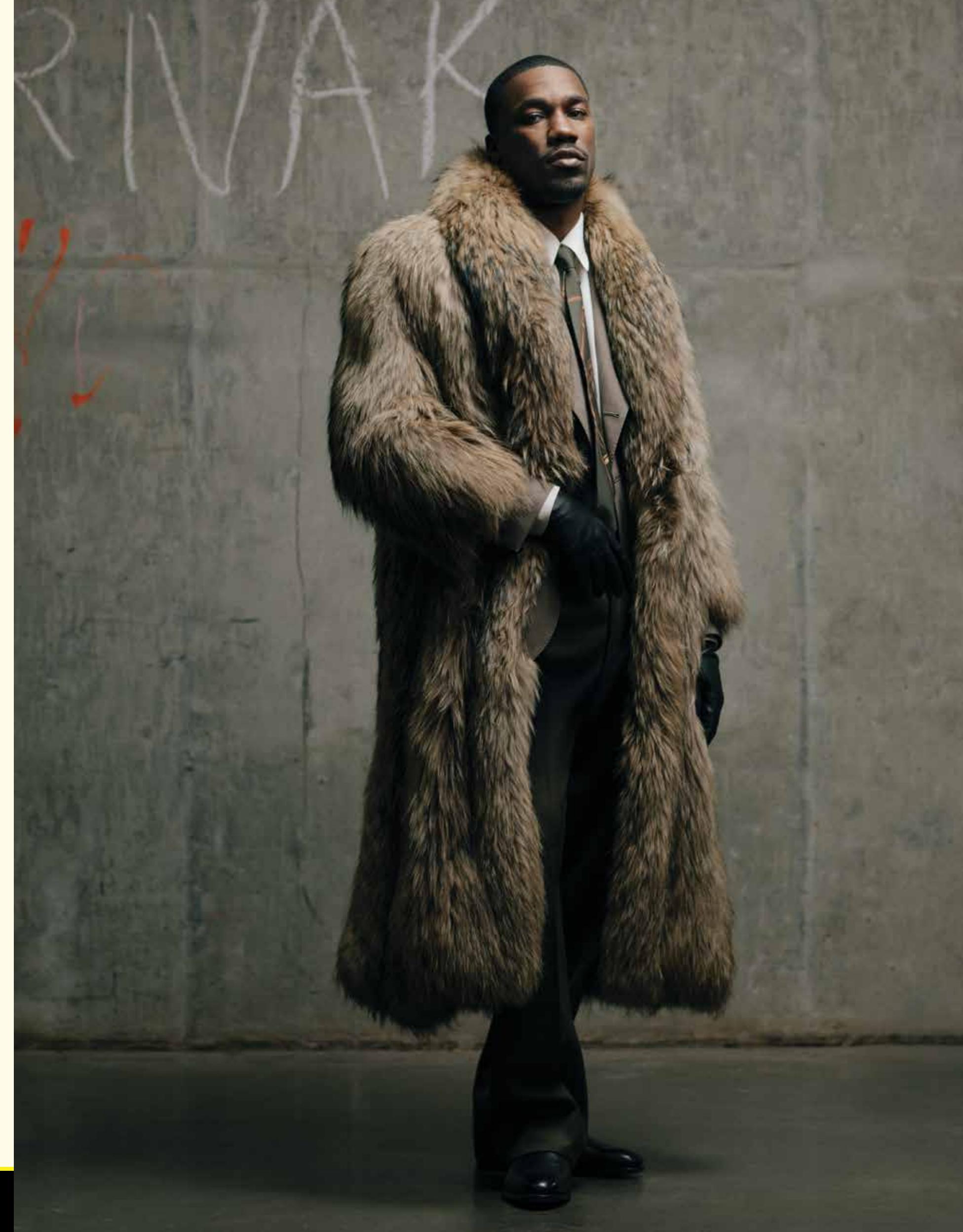
GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER Telling people no and standing for what I actually want. By nature, I'm just a very laid-back guy. I live my life, do what I'm supposed to do on a daily basis and take care of who I need to take care of. In the past, I'd just go with the flow and not really care. If it wasn't massive or detrimental [to me], I would let it slide. I was being taken advantage of because of my passive personality. I've just grown to understand the people that I want around me — whether I tell them no or yes — will just clear the room for the people that you really want around you. That will make life simpler in the end. Simon and

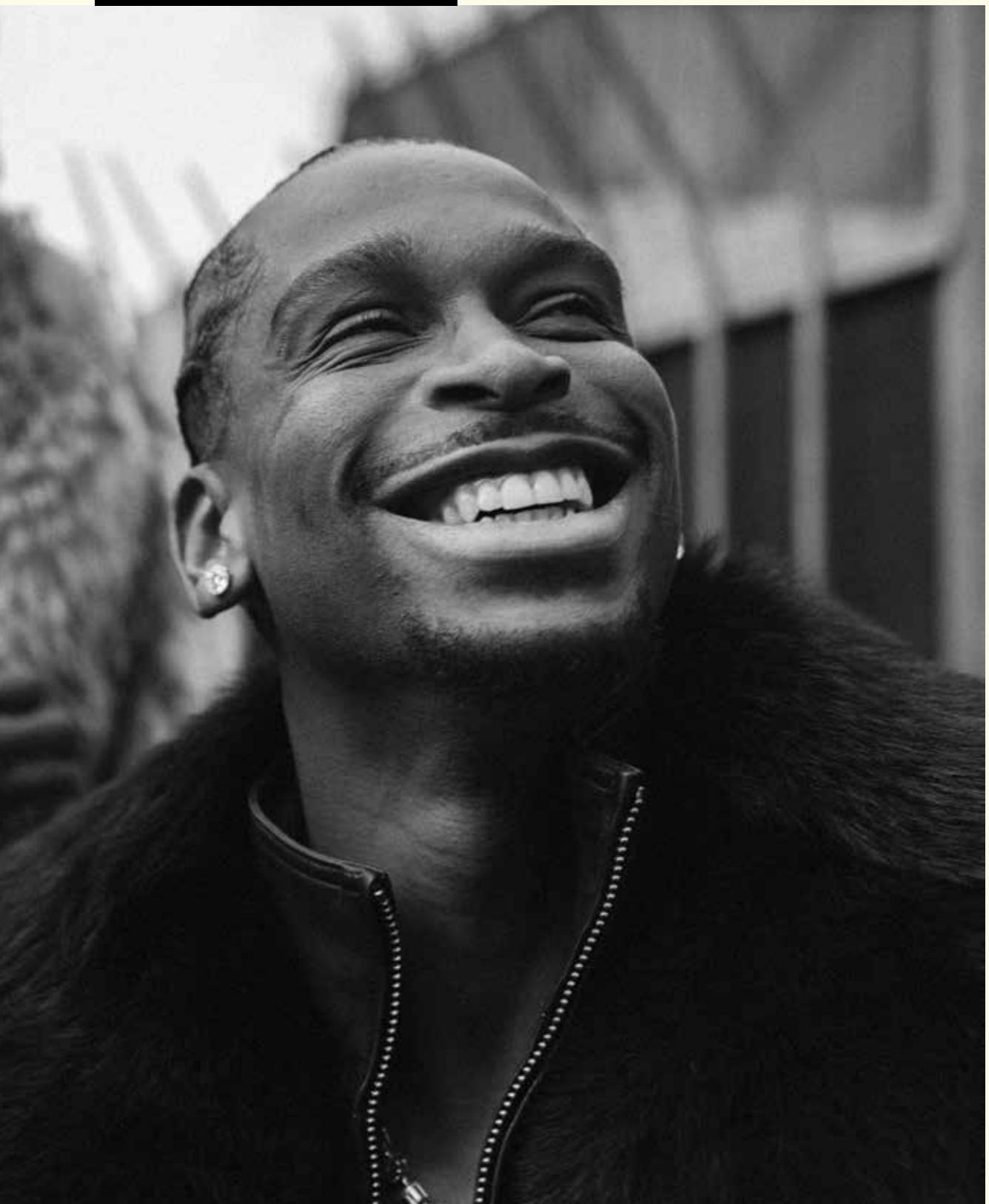
EK have helped me with that tremendously through this process. I've definitely grown in that area the most.

GIVÉON Simon will definitely tell somebody no.

GEBRELUL That's definitely my favorite thing, but for me, I think my No. 1 battle since I started has been complacency. It's something that's not front-facing, because as a manager, you can't show that, especially when you're preaching to clients not to be. (*Laughs*.)

EK would tell me that I'm not where I should be and I would look at her crazy kind of in the beginning of my career. When you look back at it, you're like, "You weren't that crazy." It's





easy to be complacent when you're young and you meet a certain level of success. It's kind of human nature to be a little bit complacent, but that's why there's a small percentage of people who touch greatness. It's a different gear you have to kick into to erase complacency.

WHAT DOES ACCOUNTABILITY MEAN TO THE THREE OF YOU?

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER The truth at all times. That's how I'd sum it up. No matter what, no matter how it's going to make you feel, it's always the truth.

GIVÉON I'm a little more emotional. I wear my heart on my sleeve. Sometimes, I'd need to go away and write it out. Then, I'll look at it objectively. I get stubborn.

GEBRELUL That's a good question because that's "the artist" versus "the athlete." Shai can take the harsh truth, but he'll dish it too.

GIVÉON I need something sugarcoated.

GEBRELUL It's not even sugarcoated. [GIVÉON] might be super defensive when he first hears it, but he'll sit, let it register and be like, "You know, you're right." That's the biggest difference between the two worlds in terms of accountability.

GIVÉON (To Gilgeous-Alexander.) I don't know how you develop that. Sometimes I'll watch some of your postgames before I go on [stage].

GEBRELUL Shai's postgame [interviews], he'll take accountability for things that were legit not his fault. (Laughs.) He's overaccountable. It's good to be at fault, sometimes.



SHAI, WHERE DID YOU GET THIS THICK-SKINNED MENTALITY FROM?

GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER My parents. We couldn't come home and make excuses for whatever it was. Whether we got in trouble at school or played badly at a tournament on the weekend, everything was, "Did you do what you could control?" That's all that they cared about. That's what was taught to me and my brother at a really young age.

I remember coming home from a basketball game [with my cousin] and we could lose by 20. Both of us can have like 20 and 15 [points] at 9 years old — which was like 40 [then] — and it was our faults being the best players on the team. Things like that are instilled in us now. Heavy is the head that wears the crown.



SIMON, WHEN YOU THINK BACK TO WHEN YOU STARTED ISLA, IS THIS WHAT YOU ENVISIONED?

GEBRELUL Yeah, for sure. Shai has the hottest sneaker out right now [in collaboration with Converse]. A basketball sneaker you can wear off the court. GIVÉON just sold out MSG. He's turning into an arena artist. He's growing in his own regard.

Our team has to be bigger to support both things. I don't think scaling means adding 10 more clients or 15 new managers. I get a lot of DMs, but growing comfortably is more my goal. Individual growth for everybody is more important than adding a bunch of people. ISLA is a very family-oriented company. My clients are my friends.

RUNNING DOWN A DREAM

Artists like **GUNNA**, **TRAVIS BARKER** and **DIPLO** love to pound the pavement — and are engaging fans by starting their own run clubs

BY KATIE BAIN

GUNNA SAYS THAT, three years ago, he could only run "like, half a mile," before stopping to catch his breath. At the time, he'd just completed a seven-month jail sentence after pleading guilty to one count of racketeering conspiracy; he was "just trying to get my mental together and block out all the mess, all the media and all the life problems."

Even those half miles helped, though. Ultimately, he "fell in love with" running. "I see the results," he says. "I feel better. I'm thinking better. My career is starting to move better."

Cut to the fall of 2025, and Gunna had amped up his mileage significantly. That September, he launched Gunna's Wunna Run Club, a traveling 5K that's now hosted races in nine cities including New York, Toronto and Johannesburg, where thousands of people turned out in early January to run alongside the rapper himself.

"My fans are not just my music consumers; they're my life consumers too," he says. "I had to give them this knowledge. They deserve it."

Plenty of musicians run; maybe it's unsurprising that an artist used to plug-

ging away in the studio for hours on end would have the stamina the activity demands. But Gunna is one of several across genres who have now parlayed their favored form of fitness into something bigger: an actual run club.

Travis Barker's Run Travis Run event launched in late 2025 with 5Ks in Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Palm Desert, Calif. Diplo reports that his Diplo's Run Club — which just hosted 5K run-and-raves in Miami and Phoenix in mid-January — has sold 100,000 tickets across 10 events that began in the fall of 2024. And Jelly Roll has his own Losers Run Club, a primarily online community with a mission, its

official site states, "to help those who are traditionally underserved in the running community hold each other accountable, with the end goal of changing their life through hard work and moving their body." (Participants are no doubt inspired by the country-rap star's own recent 275-pound weight loss.)

For Barker, running is a deeply personal pursuit: It helped him get sober in 2008. "Not being athletic, it was the thing I knew I could do on my own," the legendary blink-182 drummer says. "I didn't need any equipment. No excuses." He can now run a 5K in 19 minutes and says he gets so excited about races that he has

"MY FANS ARE NOT JUST MY MUSIC CONSUMERS; THEY'RE MY LIFE CONSUMERS, TOO. I HAD TO GIVE THEM THIS KNOWLEDGE. THEY DESERVE IT."

— GUNNA



Diplo's Run Club held a 5K at Los Angeles State Historic Park in October.

trouble sleeping the night before. "It's so therapeutic," Barker says. "Like, God gave you running."

Diplo started running while on his high school wrestling team in Florida, later finding it not only made him feel good but suited the peripatetic lifestyle he follows as a superstar DJ and producer. "No matter what city you're in, no matter where you live, there's always a place to run," he says. "I've run in Guatemala; I've run in Antarctica. You don't even really need shoes."

He sees running as "one thing you can do every day to reduce anxiety and depression, even a tiny bit. There's so much going on in your world you can't control. The only thing you really have control over is how your body feels."

It's a point he emphasizes at precisely 9 a.m. on a recent sunny Saturday in Phoenix, moments before he takes off running down the street, leading a horde of roughly 10,000 spandex-sporting fans behind him. Some flew in for this run from Seattle, Denver and points beyond, while some live across the street from the park where it's happening. Twenty-one minutes later, Diplo crosses the finish line, and two hours after that, he's onstage playing EDM classics for a packed crowd. (The set includes him doing a gender reveal for a member of the audience. "It's a boy!" he yells to the cheering crowd before dropping Disco Lines and Tinashe's "No Broke Boys.")

Diplo's Run Club is, like Gunna's and Barker's groups, another platform for both art and business. Barker's events either bring in local acts to play near the finish line — "I envision it being a mini-music festival and 5K," he says — or happen the same day he's performing in town. Wunna Run Club runs happen in the mornings, and Gunna performs that night, while Diplo and a rotation of opening DJs play sets near the finish line of every run club event. "They're more euphoric than a proper festival, where everybody's crammed in there and on their last pills, like, drinking vodka out of a CamelBak," he jokes.

"RUNNER'S HIGH IS A REAL THING. YOU GET A VERY ENERGIZED, EXCITED AUDIENCE. THEY DRINK A LOT; THEY EAT A LOT; THEY BUY A LOT OF MERCH."

—SAM HUNT, WASSERMAN MUSIC

of these shows, adding that real ravers are typically quite fit anyway, given all the dancing they do.

Good vibes aside, convincing city officials to enact street closures for race routes is a complicated and often political process, and the margins on these events are typically low. So why are these artists making a run for it?

Like Barker and Diplo, Gunna emphasizes that most crucially, Wunna Run Club is a way to share something that's benefited him with his fans. "I had to tell them, give them that knowledge, build the community," he says. "As people, we battle with health problems, so I feel like this is me giving them a starter kit to be healthy." Recently, one fan showed him before and after photos of her 100-pound weight loss, saying he helped inspire the transformation. "It just felt like I was doing something right," Gunna says.

Likewise, Barker urges that Run Travis Run is not intended to "be discouraging or make people feel like they have to be some superstar athlete to participate. There are a lot of people that show up who've never walked or run a 5K in their life." Diplo says that after he finishes the race, he often circles back to high-five participants who are still out there running and walking. "They try it, do it, and that's a huge breakthrough for those people."

The run club model, he says, is also in part a way to bring dance music to people who might never go to the club or who've aged out of the scene's late-night schedule. "Clubbing is a young man's game," says Diplo's longtime agent at Wasserman Music, Sam Hunt. "Going to [Miami nightclub] Space at three in the morning — I can confirm. Providing a place where you can have a few drinks, dance, hang out and party with your friends — but it's nine or 10 in the morning and there's a fitness element — unlocks a world of possibilities for thousands of people." Runs also tend to draw as many running fanatics as music fans, bringing a new demographic into each artist's orbit.

"In the beginning, I thought I could just tweet or post something on my Instagram and watch people come," Barker says. "Then I found out there were all these liabilities and insurance and road closures you have to worry about if there's a lot of people."

Diplo's Run Club hosts 10,000 to 15,000 people at each event, which Hunt says "is a hard profit and loss prospect. Renting a space in the park or whatever, fencing it off, bringing in power, staging, bathrooms and vending, the cost of doing that doesn't usually net out against what you can bring in."

He and the team created a money-saving hack by sharing run club venues — often city parks with epic views — with an event happening at the same site the night before or after. For the



Barker at his Run Travis Run Hit the Pavement Tour race in Los Angeles in November.



Gunna (center, in gray) led the 5K pack at his Wunna Run Club in Johannesburg in January.

L.A. run club last October, the team linked with Goldenvoice, which was hosting a show by electronic producer Mau P at the Los Angeles State Historic Park the night prior.

"Normally that would end at 12 a.m. and they'd tear the site down," Hunt says. "We made a deal with Goldenvoice that instead of tearing that event down at midnight, they'd keep everything up until 1 p.m. the next day, we'd use it for our event the next morning, then they could take everything down." In Phoenix, the Mascots Sports team had traffic flowing back on the run route almost immediately after the last runner crossed the finish line.

But while turning a profit can be tricky (Barker says he actually loses money on run club events), there are unique sales opportunities, too.

"Runner's high is a real thing," Hunt says. "You get a very energized, excited

audience. They drink a lot; they eat a lot; they buy a lot of merch." At the debut run club at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco in September 2024, the biggest issue was that the bars were understaffed. "The event is basically two hours long after the race ends," Hunt says, "but we [sell] as much food and beverage as a five- or six-hour event would normally do."

Sponsorships also help offset costs while exposing artists to new demographics and vice versa. "There's a lot of demand for sponsors and brands to be involved," Hunt says, "and a lot of brands in the health and wellness space that are interested in these audiences."

To wit, Wunna Run Club participants all leave with products from Under Armour, the hydration drink Flerish, PATH water, the running app STRAVA (where Diplo and Gunna both post their runs) and supplement maker

Cymbiotika. At Diplo's events, Hunt says "the lines to engage with the sponsor booths are as long as the bar lines."

Diplo has also benefited from becoming more ingrained in the running world; he's now an ambassador for the biometric monitoring device Whoop and has appeared in a Whoop campaign alongside soccer idol Cristiano Ronaldo. "That would probably not have happened if he didn't have these runs," co-manager Brodeur says.

For Diplo, too, the benefit isn't just brand partnership dollars but building a new event that could be licensed to "operate without me. I don't have to be at all the run clubs." (He has, thus far, played at and run in every event.)

Each of these run clubs also weaves in charitable initiatives. Donations are partially raised by the cost of participation, with Wunna Run Club charging \$75 per person, Run Travis Run beginning at \$85 and Diplo's Run Club starting at \$100. Prices go up for tiers offering perks like the chance to run alongside Barker and Diplo and VIP sections that not only offer better vantage points to see the stage but also back rubs, foot massages and ice baths.

Diplo's Run Club donates a portion of every ticket sale to Good Sports, a nonprofit creating equitable access to youth sports. (Each run benefits youth sports projects in its respective city.) Gunna and his team use money raised for his Gunna's Great Giveaway, which benefits communities in his hometown of South Fulton, Ga., while money raised through Run Travis Run goes to Community Organized Relief Effort, which benefits communities in crisis around the world.

Each artist has plans to keep it moving. Gunna says his "real goal" is to host his own marathon, which will likely happen in September. The next slate of Run Travis 5Ks will be announced in the coming weeks, and Diplo and his team are working to expand his run clubs to Chicago, Denver, Toronto and Mexico City in the near future and Europe in the longer term. Diplo also envisions a hypothetical race with Barker, Gunna and Jelly Roll, with the winner getting \$100,000 to give to his favorite charity.

Whether or not that happens, there's already a lot to feel good about, from enhanced heart rate variability to enhanced legacies. "I wanted to do something I could be proud of from a general-population point of view," Diplo says. "I've never had so many people thank me for starting a project."

BARKER: SHASHIKALI; GUNNA: DESMOND EYE

NET BENEFIT

Making a hit World Cup song is a creative hat trick: a score for the artist, FIFA and a global audience

BY LEILA COBO

SHAKIRA was spending the holidays at her farm in Uruguay, across a vast ocean from South Africa, host country of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, when she conceived “Waka Waka (This Time for Africa).” Already a global phenom known for her vocals and dance moves, the Colombian star had quickly gone to work when presented with the opportunity to write a song for the upcoming soccer tournament, and she soon turned a track around that fused genres, languages and multinational beats with abandon.

“It was sort of magical the way it happened, because I was just walking from the barn into the house, and I started singing the melody of the verse, with the lyrics, automatically, in English,” Shakira says. “It was like someone was dictating it from above. And I felt so connected to my childhood, to my roots, to my Afro Caribbean roots as well ... I was so excited, I called the people at Sony and told them I had just written the most amazing World Cup song.”

“Waka Waka,” produced by Shakira with John Hill, was already catchy — but it became even more so after a fortuitous encounter in a New York studio between Hill and South African pop fusion group Freshlyground, which then contributed to the song, adding a musical element that honored the host nation.

“Shakira moved swiftly from interest to creation, writing and recording a track that stood apart from the musical landscape at the time,” recalls Dusko Justic, senior vp of international artist strategy and development for Sony Latin Iberia, who at the time was responsible for the A&R and marketing for the official FIFA World Cup music program. “Once FIFA heard the finished record, there was no debate.”

For nearly four decades, FIFA has partnered with prominent musi-

cians to craft songs that celebrate the World Cup and its competing nations. “Waka Waka,” the official song of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, remains the most successful World Cup song in history and a global juggernaut; its video has been viewed a staggering 4.4 billion times on YouTube, making it the platform’s eighth most viewed music video of all time. A decade after its release, Shakira would perform the enduring hit at another globally watched sporting event: the Super Bowl LIV halftime show, where it ended her co-headlining set with Jennifer Lopez.

“Waka Waka” had all the elements that make for a successful and enduring World Cup song: a danceable, uptempo beat to resonate with au-

of her two sons after meeting her at the video shoot.

World Cup songs are not always such massive hits — nor were they always officially sanctioned by FIFA. The first World Cup was played in 1930, but the event wouldn’t designate a song as “official” until the 1962 event in Chile when Chilean band Los Ramblers’ “El Rock del Mundial” was declared the tournament’s official song.

It’s unclear when FIFA became actively involved in the song’s selection (the organization did not respond to *Billboard*’s requests for comment), though multiple reports cite Italian

composer Giorgio Moroder’s “To Be Number One,” recorded for the 1990 World Cup in Italy.

appreciate the possibilities of official songs until the 1998 tournament in France when, in addition to the official anthem (Youssou N’Dour and Axelle Red’s “La Cour des Grands [Do You Mind If I Play]”), Ricky Martin released the official song, “The Cup of Life.” With both English and Spanish (“La Copa de la Vida”) versions and its French rallying cry of “allez, allez, allez,” the track made the World Cup “the most influential and pivotal platform in the transition of helping to create the Latin explosion,” says Tommy Mottola, who was then Sony Music chairman.

“The Cup of Life,” with its mix of brash trumpets and Brazilian *batuca*-da, was a global hit, peaking at No. 45 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and spending 34 weeks on the chart, long after the monthlong tournament had ended. It was so successful, in fact, that when Martin earned a 1999 Grammy nomination for best Latin pop performance for his Spanish-language album *Vuelve* (which included “The Cup of Life”), Mottola pushed hard to have him on the show, over the Recording Academy’s objections.

After the academy relented, the rest was history. Martin’s exuberant performance of “The Cup of Life” — complete with a huge backing band and performers on stilts — became what then-UTA head Rob Prinz called “the single biggest game-changing moment for any artist in the history of the Grammys.”

It not only catapulted his career into the mainstream but also helped to usher in “the Latin explosion,” as it would become known stateside. “[Taking it] from the platform of the World Cup to the stage of the Grammys really was the key to set off this Latin explosion,” Mottola says. “There would probably be no Bad Bunny without this.”

The World Cup is, by far, the most widely seen sporting event in the world, with an estimated 5 billion people tuning in to watch the 2022

STUART FRANKLIN/GETTY IMAGES

“A WORLD CUP SONG NEEDS TO HAVE THAT FEELING OF ADRENALINE THAT YOU GET WHEN YOU’RE PLAYING OR WHEN YOU’RE WATCHING AN EXCITING GAME.”

— SHAKIRA

dences around the world (the song samples “Zamina Mina [Zangaléwa],” by Cameroonian band Golden

Sounds), an artist with global appeal and reach, and a featured artist representing the host nation. Shakira also recorded the song in Spanish, which drew in her Latin fan base. And significantly, she was already a genuine soccer aficionado; the song’s music video not only incorporated her signature dance moves but also major soccer stars from Lionel Messi to Gerard Piqué, who became Shakira’s longtime partner and the father

Since then, every tournament has had an official song, anthem or — for the past several World Cups — both. (The exact distinction between these designations has shifted over the years.) Some of them have been performed at the closing ceremony (as was the case with “Live It Up,” performed by Nicky Jam, Will Smith and Era Istrefi in 2018) and some at the opening ceremony (like 2014’s “We Are One [Ole Ola],” performed in Brazil by Pitbull, Jennifer Lopez and Brazilian artist Claudia Leitte).

But record labels didn’t fully



Shakira performed “Waka Waka” at the kick-off celebration concert for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in Soweto, South Africa.

edition at some point, including 1.5 billion viewers for the tournament’s final match, according to FIFA. But while that platform “100% provides value” to any music release, Mottola says, it doesn’t guarantee huge, or lasting, commercial success.

Sony Music — which was FIFA’s official label partner for many years until 2019 — released “The Cup of Life” and “Waka Waka,” and in their wake, the importance of music as a promotional vehicle during the World Cup soared. What was once one “official” song became many, with tournament sponsors, broadcasters and individual countries commissioning original tracks.

“It used to be that there was a single song that FIFA chose and everybody used that song,” says Afo Verde, chairman/CEO of Sony Music Latin Iberia. “But after ‘Waka Waka,’ every brand, every network wanted to have

a World Cup song. And while a hit is not something you simply dictate ... it helps when there is a single song that’s played everywhere you go.”

But, Verde continues bluntly, “you need a real hit. And you look for a hit informed by what’s happening on the planet, what the social climate is. You need to embody the spirit of the sport, convey a message of unity, understanding it’s a competition. The song needs to reflect that each team is going to give their all.”

In 2021, FIFA launched its FIFA Sound strategy, meant to connect soccer and music fans, and partnered with Universal Music Group for a series of releases and initiatives that included the first-ever multisong FIFA World Cup official soundtrack for the 2022 event in Qatar.

From that soundtrack, “Arhbo,” performed by Ozuna with Congolese French rapper and singer-songwriter

GIMS and produced by RedOne, topped *Billboard*’s Latin Airplay chart for three weeks in 2022.

At press time, FIFA had yet to announce an official tournament song or anthem for this year’s event, which will be jointly hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. But official FIFA songs already include Robbie Williams’ “Desire” (penned for the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup), while last year Telemundo premiered its own official song, “Somos Más,” performed by Carlos Vives, Xavi, Wisin and Emilia.

There have been notable World Cup songs through the years. In 2014, “We Are One” hit No. 59 on the Hot 100; as of Jan. 22, it has 146.5 million on-demand official streams, according to Luminato. And K’Naan’s “Wavin’ Flag” from 2010 was chosen by Coca-Cola

as its official song for the tournament, garnering 161.6 million on-demand streams in the United States and reaching No. 82 on the Hot 100.

But none have come close to “Waka Waka” in consumption or longevity — perhaps in part because Shakira fully understood the importance of the sport in the creation of the music, a rare combination.

“A World Cup song needs to have that feeling of adrenaline that you get when you’re playing or when you’re watching an exciting game,” she says. “A suspenseful pre-chorus, a joyous, explosive chorus. You have to feel the payoff. And I think the rhythm is important, so people can celebrate not only with the words but also with dancing, with their bodies. I think music is the best vehicle for moments of extreme emotion, like a World Cup can be.”

THE SPORTS ISSUE

THE RIGHT TRACK

F1 racing is picking up speed in America — and music is fueling its rise

BY HANNAH DAILEY



Kygo performed ahead of the
COTA 2025 Formula 1 U.S.
Grand Prix in Austin.

THE HEAT IS KISSING 90 degrees on a mid-October Friday in Austin, where Bobby Epstein is giving a *Jurassic Park*-style media tour through the perpetually under construction Circuit of the Americas (COTA) racing grounds.

Standing at the head of a moving shuttle bus like a safari guide, the circuit's chairman points to piles of dirt. As he tells us in his easygoing drawl, a carousel and Ferris wheel will soon stand here; the skeletons of future roller coasters tower over the horizon behind him.

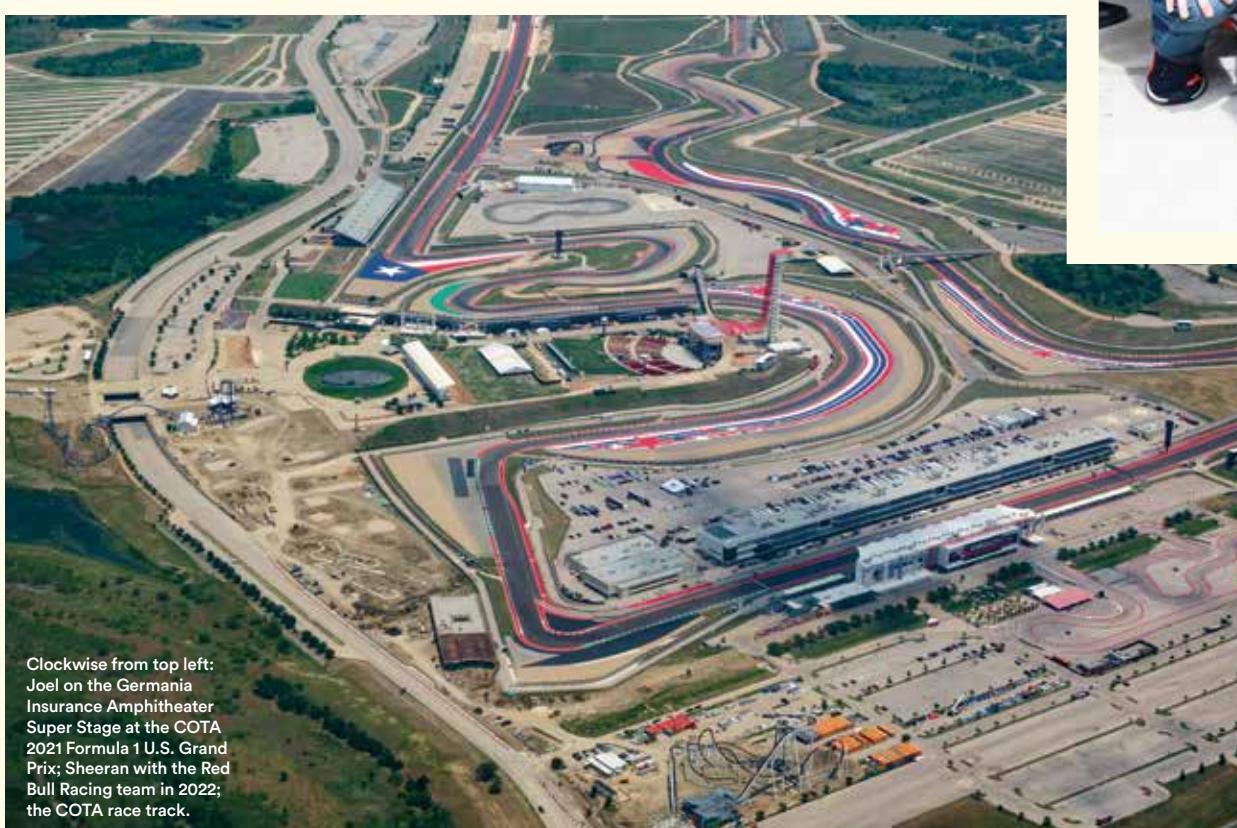
On the property's great lawn, we pass two massive music stages and rows of vendors selling everything from LEGO race cars to cowboy hats. (About 6,000 of the latter, to be precise, are stocked for the weekend.) There's a *lucha libre* wrestling ring, miniature golf and go-karts, and in one section showing off cutting-edge technology, a tent housing a life-size model of a six-propeller flying taxicab hailed as the "future" of air travel.

When I remark that it feels like we're at the World's Fair, a delighted grin flashes across Epstein's face. "That's exactly what we're after," he says.

In reality, we're at the Formula 1 United States Grand Prix, where hundreds of thousands of fans will soon pack in to catch flashes of race cars zipping through the course's famously sharp corners and deceptively steep hills during one of the racing organization's tentpole events. But for over a decade, COTA has been working to transform this annual affair — the biggest of about nine races held here each year since it opened in 2012 — into more than just a sporting event.

The COTALand theme park they're in the midst of building is just COTA's latest push to make motor sport a way of life in the United States, a market F1 in particular had long struggled to crack before it finally erupted in mainstream popularity at the end of the 2010s.

Now, the amount of U.S. Grand Prix has shot up from just one to three of the 24 total in-season F1 stops, with annual races introduced in Miami in 2022 and Las Vegas in 2023; this past November, Beyoncé and Jay-Z made appearances on the track in Sin City, and mgk, T-Pain and Zedd headlined a festival-like run of outdoor shows surrounding the race. What once was a niche sport predominantly associated with European



Clockwise from top left:
Joel on the Germania
Insurance Amphitheater
Super Stage at the COTA
2021 Formula 1 U.S. Grand
Prix; Sheeran with the Red
Bull Racing team in 2022;
the COTA race track.

car enthusiasts has exploded into an America-size media and entertainment spectacle. And — if the Academy Award-nominated, Brad Pitt-led *F1: The Movie*'s \$189.5 million in domestic box-office revenue in 2025, and its star-packed soundtrack, which hit No. 13 on the *Billboard* 200, are any indication — it's only getting bigger.

But while the rest of America might only just be catching up to speed, COTA has been in this race for years — and it's been a key player in helping F1 achieve its own long-term goal of

crossing over as a competitive force in the music business.

"They were far ahead of everyone," F1 chief communications and corporate relations officer Liam Parker says of COTA. "Every time you go to COTA, the talk is around not only the racing but what's the big act everyone is going to see that evening."

Tonight, that artist is Kygo, set to perform after the evening's weekend-opening sprint. After playing Grands Prix in Bahrain, Mexico City and Miami over the years (with more to be an-



nounced later), the Norwegian DJ has become an F1 devotee — but the chance to advertise himself to the sport's diverse, rapidly expanding fan base at each race is more than enough reason on its own to keep coming back.

"If you play a music festival, a lot of people have already heard about you or your music," Kygo tells *Billboard* in his trailer Friday night, just minutes before taking the Super Stage. "But if you go play at F1, that might be 80,000 people who don't even know who you are."

"Some other [venues] were doing it, but I think what [COTA] has done is help wake up the rest of the racing world within Formula 1 to realize: This has an impact," Parker adds. "This makes you global."

ASK ANY SPECTATOR MILLING about in Red Bull, Ferrari and McLaren team gear beneath the unforgiving Texas sun this weekend how they became interested in F1, and it's a good bet that three words will come up: *Drive To Survive*.

With seven seasons since its 2019 debut and an eighth on the way, the Netflix docuseries has introduced a horde of new American fans to the league's once-insular world of high-class, high-stakes and high-octane drama, with

cameras following top international drivers like Lando Norris (who, two months after racing in Austin, was crowned the 2025 F1 world champion), Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton on every stop of each year's racing season. Viewers attend the Grand Prix in Texas hoping to see their favorites in action — and get hooked on the overall culture of race day that can only be fully experienced in person, not just because the cars roar past at truly dizzying speeds (like, so fast your eyes can barely even track them) but also because of all the live music and entertainment opportunities between the stops and starts on the track.

After Kygo in Austin last October, that involved sets from country icon Garth Brooks following Saturday's qualifying round and Americana band Turnpike Troubadours after Sunday's main event, each attended by thousands of ticketholders who chose to stay and listen long after all the drivers had retired to their garages.

But what many *Drive To Survive* bandwagoners may not realize is that COTA, the site of the U.S. Grand Prix since the year it opened, had been preparing for this surge in demand well before the show premiered in 2019.

"I honestly believe we were right at the front end of that," COTA senior

vp of music and entertainment Glynn Wedgewood says over Zoom a few weeks after the U.S. Grand Prix. "We just fully went for it in 2016 and haven't looked back."

The turning point he's referencing was swift — Taylor Swift, to be exact. After testing out adding live music to COTA's F1 race weekend with an Elton John performance that was damped by Hurricane Patricia rainfall in 2015, Wedgewood says that COTA took a gamble on inviting the pop star, fresh off her 1989 world tour, to headline its first-ever festival-style lineup the following year, which also featured Usher and The Roots.

Swift is known for backing the right horses, and F1 turned out to be one of them. That October, she played her first and only show of 2016 at the U.S. Grand Prix for a crowd of 80,000 fans, helping COTA set a then-record for overall weekend attendance (270,000, which would skyrocket to 440,000 by 2022) and paving the way for the event (and ultimately, F1 as a whole) to rebrand as a premier concert outlet.

"To just go, like, 'We're doing the biggest pop star in the world' — nobody [in F1] was doing that," Wedgewood recalls.

Ten years later, it seems like everyone's doing that. It's now common for A-list artists to perform on multiact

Grand Prix bills, with the sport's numerous host cities all over the world following COTA's lead. And in the decade since Swift performed, Justin Timberlake, Bruno Mars, Britney Spears, Billy Joel, Ed Sheeran and more have each headlined an F1 weekend in Austin.

Like Kygo, many artists are also now F1 fans themselves; as Wedgewood notes, he doesn't have to field nearly as many questions from prospective performers before booking. ("What is this? We're playing around cars?" he recalls people asking in the past with a laugh.) But previously, a big way COTA enticed musicians was by investing in a main stage that appealed to performers as much as it did fans, constructing its now-signature Super Stage in 2015 between turns 11 and 12 on the track — not far from its 14,000-capacity open-air Germania Insurance Amphitheater, which was built in 2013 — so that audiences could watch shows while standing exactly where their favorite drivers had raced just hours prior.

"When an artist and their crew walk in and get on that stage and look out, it's like, 'Oh, we get this. This was built for this,'" says Wedgewood, who is the talent buyer for both the Super Stage and amphitheater for F1 weekends. (Live Nation handles the majority of other bookings for the amphitheater.) "It's not just trying to shoehorn an act into a venue that doesn't make any sense. It makes sense because it was built that way before we even started doing it."

Whether it's the novelty of the Austin venue or the massive exposure an F1 gig now guarantees, more stars than ever want a slot at the U.S. Grand Prix. But Wedgewood says a key element of his job is curating a lineup that appeals to the broad, undefined music tastes of racing fans. (To wit: *F1 The Album* was about as eclectic as soundtracks come, featuring Sheeran, Rosé, Chris Stapleton, Peggy Gou, Burna Boy and Doja Cat among many others.)

"A large part of what we do [is] having something for everyone there," Wedgewood says. "Like, the contrast between Kygo with the crazy loud, visually stunning dance show, or someone like Garth Brooks, who's a legacy, legend, [one of the] biggest-selling country artist of all time — that is 100% intentional."

Ultimately, the biggest payoff from COTA's pioneering efforts in the space might just be that, as the highest-attended event on its calendar, the U.S. Grand Prix is also the circuit's best



opportunity each year to advertise itself to the public as a music venue, with dozens more concerts and festivals programmed annually beyond those attached to races. In the coming months, mgk and Wiz Khalifa, Jack Johnson, Toto, Subtronics and Five Finger Death Punch will all perform as part of COTA's extensive run of amphitheater shows following the F1 weekend.

"We're just constantly busy every year," Wedgewood says. "It's just this beast that keeps going ... [The U.S. Grand Prix] is, without a doubt, the biggest event, but it's just a part of what we do."

ON SUNDAY MORNING

COTA's paddock is buzzing with team staff, engineers, media personnel and even what appears to be a few Netflix cameramen, all milling about, the pre-race energy palpable.

Flashes bombard Mercedes team principal and F1 royalty Toto Wolff as he makes his entrance for the day. Alexandra Saint Meaux, the fiancée of Monégasque driver Charles Leclerc, stands by the Ferrari garage holding the leash to the couple's beloved blonde dachshund, Leo, over whom VIP pass-wielding fans gasp and squeal like he's an A-list celebrity. Later, Hamilton parts the sea on his kick scooter, speedily escaping from the hectic press area.

And whereas 2000s pop hits had blared over the speakers on Friday and Saturday, today the playlist has changed to match the stakes: "Lose

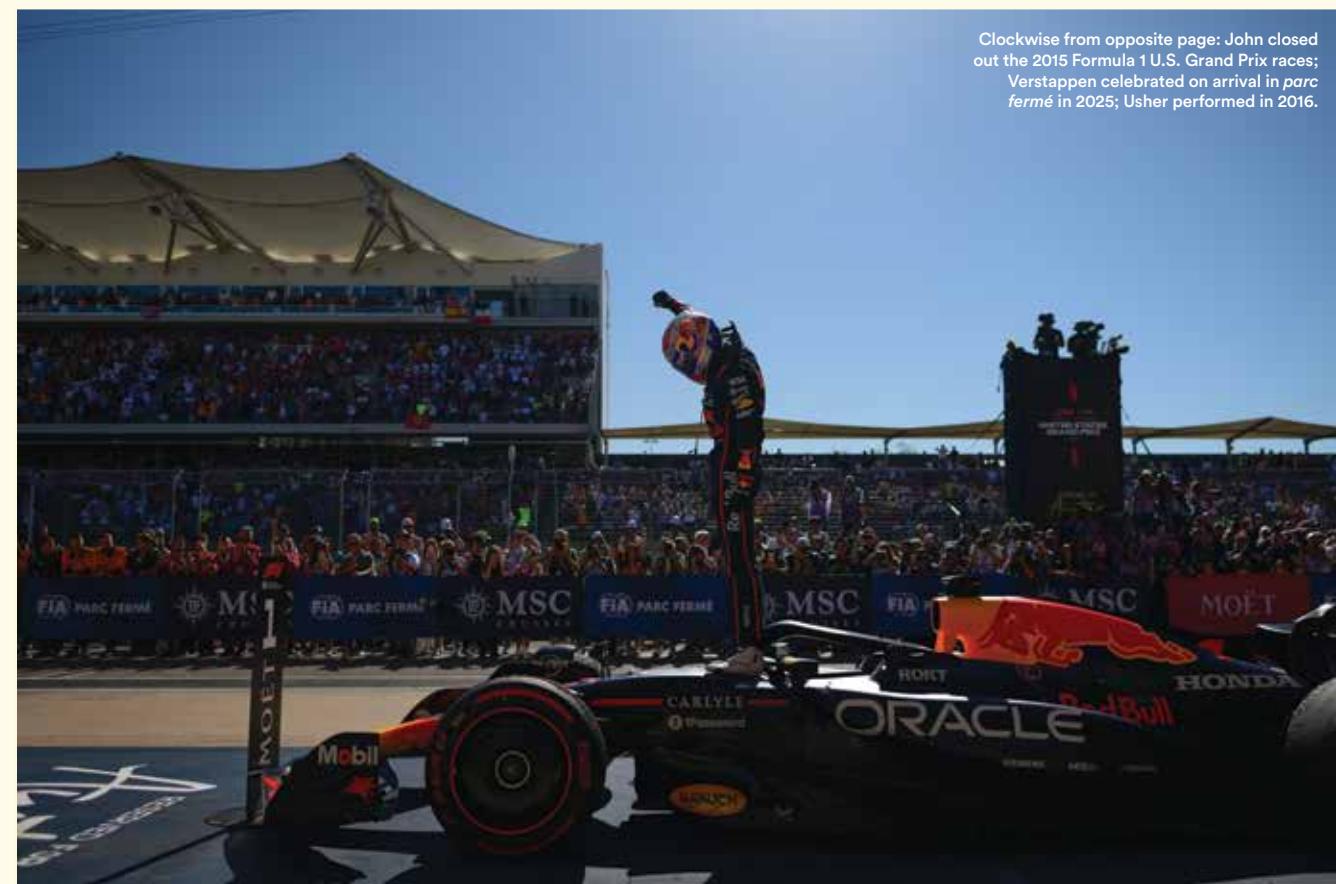


Yourself" by Eminem (who headlined the 2024 U.S. Grand Prix) greets everyone as they arrive.

When the lights go out and the sound of 20 engines thundering to life cuts through the crowd's silent anticipation, all eyes in the grandstands will fix on the race for 56 laps. Most of the rest of the weekend, however, will be busy with not just the big headline shows, but all the other ways F1 is integrating music and brand partnerships.

"Events you saw five years ago, [the promoters] just thought this was all about racing," Parker recalls. "You turn up, you watch a race, you go home. Now, seeing what others have done — particularly in the U.S. — elevating and bringing music and festivals and environments into their world, it's core to the overall weekend."

JOHN GARY MELLETT/GETTY IMAGES; VERSTAPPEN MARIO REINA/FORMULA 1/GETTY IMAGES; Usher: RICKEN WIREIMAGE



Like COTA, F1 has been cultivating a wider cultural presence for years, though Parker concedes that even his fellow higher-ups, including CEO Stefano Domenicali (one of *Billboard*'s 2026 Sports Power Players), weren't fully prepared for the speed with which *Drive To Survive* — which debuted a year before the coronavirus pandemic, when Parker posited people stuck at home were more inclined to tune in — helped them grow. Tapping into the American market through entertainment-focused crossover was key, but made difficult by the fact that, to this day, none of the drivers on the grid are from the United States. Parker remembers one of F1's first ventures into music: "F1 Tracks," a series of themed playlists curated by artists such as Mumford & Sons, Feeder and more that launched in 2019.

From there, the company booked increasingly well-known artists to sing different countries' national anthems or to simply appear at races to boost the races' profile. This year in Austin, it debuted a new "Grid Gigs" series featuring performers who would open races with miniconcerts performed on the actual track, starting with Texas singer-songwriter Drake Milligan.

"From a pure business point of view ... you want to keep people there as long as possible to enjoy the event," Parker says. When F1 offers music programming, fans "spend longer at the event. They obviously come away from it with a bigger recognition of how good the event was, so they come back again."

Clockwise from opposite page: John closed out the 2015 Formula 1 U.S. Grand Prix races; Verstappen celebrated on arrival in parc fermé in 2025; Usher performed in 2016.

something very important to me."

Williams Racing's Alex Albon has seen firsthand how the sport has changed since his rookie year, particularly stateside. "I remember coming into Austin in 2019 and [COTA] already had the stage over on the other side of the track," he says, noting that while the drivers are always too busy to catch the post-race concerts, they're enjoyable for his fiancée (pro golfer Lily Muni He) and other family traveling with the drivers.

"I remember thinking, like, 'Oh, what's this about? I've never seen such a huge music stage situated beside the circuit,'" he continues. "It just feels like every year it gets bigger. The whole thing is a show."

With Verstappen cruising past the checkered flag with an eight-second lead over Norris, securing one more win for Red Bull, another Grand Prix is in the books. For the drivers and teams, it's already on to the next one in Mexico City, even as the audience here heads over to the amphitheater to watch the Turnpike Troubadours set — or try out the Circuit Breaker, the first of COTALand's roller coasters to open to the public.

As for F1, it's on to the next big advancement in music and entertainment, whatever that might be. "Ten years ago, we were a different sport," Parker says, noting the uptick in female viewers and fans under age 35 in recent years. "We can't, and we shouldn't, and we won't keep going down the same old route, doing the same old things."

SPORTS POWER PLAYERS

Few mediums capture the passions of the world as much as sports and music. And when the two intertwine, powerful moments often result. Here, *Billboard* highlights a broad cross-section of executives, artists and athletes who bridge the divide — and bring the two sectors closer together.

THE SPORTS ISSUE

ISRAEL ADESANYA

UFC FIGHTER, DJ

Known as one of the most electrifying forces in the UFC, Adesanya carved out a new creative lane in 2025 when he DJ'd his first set at Afro-soul in New Zealand. "My job is all about having fun," the decorated fighter says. "Fighting has a beat and a dance of its own rhythm. Having a dance background helps me understand it better than most." At UFC 243, Adesanya showcased that firsthand, incorporating choreography into his walkout alongside a team of dancers ahead of his bout.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Anderson Silva. He was my favorite to watch in any era."

AMAZON MUSIC

KRISTEN GAMBETTA

GLOBAL HEAD OF PARTNER MARKETING

Was it a coincidence that Nas performed a scheduled Las Vegas arena show for the 2025 Emirates NBA Cup just before his hometown New York Knicks won the trophy in December? "It was an amazing moment that tapped into the nostalgia and momentum shaping culture right now," Gambetta says, referring to the sold-out concert outside T-Mobile Arena as well as Nas' introduction of the Knicks before the game. Gambetta describes her Amazon Music role as "sitting at the intersection of the growing investment in sports from Amazon and the cultural reach of music."

APPLE

OLIVER SCHUSSER

VP OF APPLE MUSIC, SPORTS AND BEATS

Schusser highlights how the Brad Pitt-starring *F1: The Movie* became "the biggest sports movie of all time" and Apple TV+'s "biggest movie of all time," with a Grammy-nominated soundtrack. Apple also secured U.S. media rights for Formula 1, "which allows us to reimagine how fans experience a global sports powerhouse on Apple TV," Schusser says. Apple's continued sponsorship of the Super Bowl halftime show has yielded "defining cultural moments" like Kendrick Lamar's 2025 performance. "For the last three years, Apple Music has delivered the biggest, most-watched Super Bowl halftime show of all time," he says.

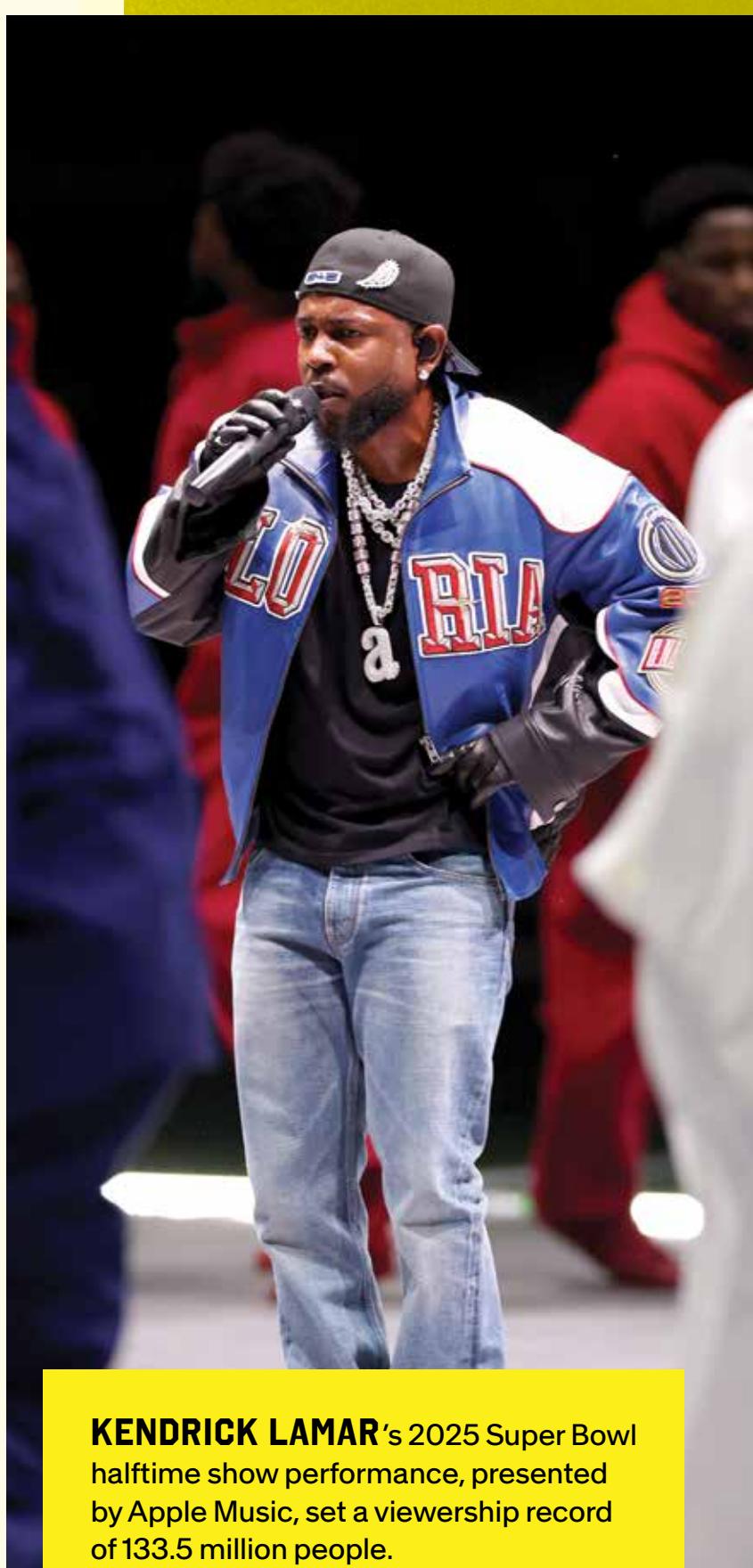
ARTIST PARTNER GROUP

BRIAN NOLAN

PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL MARKETING AND SYNC

When JD Sports — the British sports-fashion retail company that owns brands like Finish Line and Footasylum — launched its first-ever global brand campaign, it turned to APG's BabyChiefDolt, whose "Cloud 9" soundtracked the spot and who appeared in the campaign. Nolan shouts out JD's Paul Diehl for helping pull together the partnership, and adds, "Whether it be integration with a specific moment, athlete or opportunity, utilizing the passion and reach of the sports world is a key driver in our marketing efforts."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Bo Jackson. The combination of being a two-sport athlete, with the iconic Nike campaigns and the SC Trainer shoes, was incredibly impactful in my childhood and I still am one of his biggest fans to this day."



KENDRICK LAMAR's 2025 Super Bowl halftime show performance, presented by Apple Music, set a viewership record of 133.5 million people.

ATLANTIC RECORDS

JOSEPH KHOURY

SENIOR VP OF A&R AND MARKETING

F1: The Movie was a cultural juggernaut in 2025, and Khoury worked on bringing its soundtrack to life at the Miami Grand Prix in a major way. "With our partners at Apple, Warner Bros. Pictures and F1, we spent months building Miami race weekend into our album launch campaign," Khoury says, "revealing our artist lineup on the F1 team garages, having Tiësto and Sexy Red take over race-day performances on the track and creating an immersive APX GP garage experience in the paddock that blended the film, the soundtrack and sport into one space."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Donovan McNabb. Watching him as a kid got me hooked on football and sports in general. Go Birds."

BAD BUNNY

ARTIST, SUPER BOWL LX HALFTIME SHOW HEADLINER

Making history is routine for Bad Bunny. The Puerto Rican superstar, whose *DeB/Tirar MÁS FOTOS* became the first all-Spanish album in history to win album of the year at the 2026 Grammys, will add another accolade to his robust résumé on Feb. 9: Super Bowl halftime show headliner, becoming the first artist who makes music solely in Spanish to anchor the biggest stage in the world. And after three straight years of record-breaking viewership — Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl performance drew 133.5 million viewers in 2025, according to the NFL — Bad Bunny's star is about to shoot straight into the stratosphere.

BIG SEAN

CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

DETROIT PISTONS

In December, the Detroit Pistons expanded their partnership with hometown star Big Sean, appointing him creative director of global experience. In the role, Sean will lend his expertise across music, fashion and storytelling while helping elevate the game-day experience, designing merchandise for the franchise and spotlighting local artists during Pistons halftime performances. "Sports has always had a soundtrack, and my role is about making sure the city's sound, style and energy are fully represented on that stage," he says.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Michael Jordan, even though that might be controversial given the rivalry with the Pistons. There was simply nothing like Jordan in our era, and you still see his influence everywhere today. But my favorite team is the 2004 Pistons. The Bad Boys and them changed the NBA forever."

BIG3

ICE CUBE

JEFF KWATINETZ

CO-CEOS

BIG3 wrapped its eighth season over the summer, which marked exponential growth for the three-on-three basketball league, switching to a location-based model with eight franchises planted in major markets across the United States. Music is a key part of the game-day experience, with in-arena DJs spinning tracks and halftime performers integrated into the spectacle. "No other major sport in the world has as much music during competition as the BIG3 and it's not even close," Cube says. But the West Coast legend's proudest sports-meets-music accomplishment of 2025 was presenting former NBA and University of Michigan star Jalen Rose with the annual Ice Cube Impact Award at the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame for his work in the community.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Muhammad Ali. His confidence."

—Ice Cube

BOARDROOM

RICH KLEIMAN

CO-FOUNDER/CEO

KEVIN DURANT

CO-FOUNDER

In 2025, *Boardroom* cover story subjects included NBA great Carmelo Anthony, hip-hop star Quavo, tennis titan Aryna Sabalenka and R&B phenom GIVÉON, a group emphasizing, as Kleiman says, that *Boardroom*'s bridge between music and sports "is evident in the voice of our platform. We cover music and sports in the same way and curate news according to what we believe is relevant in the zeitgeist." This synergy was also present at September's Game Plan, the third annual collaborative conference from *Boardroom* and CNBC that in 2025 featured headliner Travis Scott.

FAVORITE ARTIST "Jay-Z, who has been the soundtrack to multiple eras in my life." —Kleiman

BORAS CORPORATION

BILL GLUVNA

CERTIFIED PLAYER AGENT

Gluvna works with Boras' baseball clients, who include superstars Juan Soto, Bryce Harper and Cody Bellinger, and helps them "expand their brand, reach and appeal beyond baseball" into additional areas, including music. "Our clients surround themselves with music," he says. "They each have their anthems when working out, when locking in for a game and when they are introduced to 40,000 people in a stadium. Music is a psychological tool that can shape their mood, sharpen their focus and even influence their physical performance on the field. It can, quite literally, be a game-changer."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Bo Jackson. He was a real-life superhero."

From left: *Boardroom*'s **KEVIN DURANT, CARMELO ANTHONY, QUAVO**, *Boardroom*'s **RICH KLEIMAN** and Bose chief marketing officer **JIM MOLICA** during NBA All-Star Weekend in 2025.



THE SPORTS ISSUE

CAA

DAVE AUSENBERG EXECUTIVE OF MUSIC TOURING

Twenty One Pilots had performed at every room in their hometown of Columbus, Ohio, except The Horseshoe of Ohio Stadium — until Aussenberg helped the duo land a gig at the NHL Stadium Series in March 2025. The game was the second-largest gathering in NHL history, with more than 94,000 fans in attendance. "With an epic mix of fire and ice," Aussenberg says, "the band blew away fans in the stadium and at home on ESPN." Aussenberg landed another 90,000-plus crowd for Garth Brooks at the Formula 1 United States Grand Prix at Circuit of the Americas in Austin, the country legend's only show in 2025.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Growing up in Houston, Hakeem Olajuwon will always be the best. The '93-'94 throwback uniforms are still the most underrated jerseys of all time."

CAM'RON MA\$E

HOSTS

IT IS WHAT IT IS PODCAST

Cam'ron and Ma\$e continue to be unrivaled in the podcast world with their brainchild *It Is What It Is*. Hosted by Treasure "Stat Baby" Wilson, the Harlem pair tackle sports with an unfiltered lens and comedic flair. Beyond their banter, the show regularly features heavyweights of the sports world including Hall of Famers Michael Irvin and Paul Pierce. While sports anchors the show, occasionally Cam and Ma\$e will surprise fans by slipping into freestyle mode, showcasing why their lyrical finesse remains unmatched.

CARDI B

ARTIST

In 2025, Cardi B returned to the spotlight with her long-awaited second album, *Am I the Drama?*, after a seven-year hiatus. The set earned her a second No. 1 debut on the Billboard 200 and unexpectedly introduced her to a new audience: the wrestling world. Last August, Cardi brought her signature bravado to New Jersey's MetLife Stadium, strutting onto the grand stage as host of WWE SummerSlam, where she previewed her song "Hello." Offstage, Cardi has also embraced football, often seen cheering her boyfriend, New England Patriots wide receiver Stefon Diggs, at Gillette Stadium in Massachusetts.

COLUMBIA RECORDS

KERRY HICKEY SENIOR VP OF LICENSING

Columbia landed a spooky success this past Halloween with a placement during game six of the Dodgers-Blue Jays World Series for Tame Impala's "Dracula," a tie-in that functioned on multiple levels for Dodgers fan Hickey, who works "daily with the leagues, networks and streamers strategically integrating our artists and recordings into major live sports culture moments, national campaigns and well-told athlete documentaries and docuseries."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Legacywise, the GOAT Michael Jordan. His entire ethos has had the most inspiring influence on my life and career."



From left: EMPIRE CEO **GHAZI** and executive vp of marketing **PETER KADIN** with San Francisco Giants CEO **LARRY BAER** on the field at Oracle Park in 2025.

CULTURE JAM

EESEAN BOLDEN FOUNDER/CEO

After releasing the album *Kawhi Leonard Presents: Culture Jam Vol. 1* with the titular two-time NBA champion, Bolden raised the bar in 2025 by partnering with burgeoning superstar Anthony Edwards for a new compilation, *Culture Jam Presents: Legend in My Hood*. The project brought Bolden and Edwards' shared love of hip-hop and basketball into a cohesive 12-track set and boasted a mix of heavyweight talent — including Pusha T, Big Sean and Quavo — alongside rising rookies such as Hunxho, Rob49 and even Edwards' brother, bdiffrent. "Nobody is doing it like us," Bolden says about his creative agency, which also partnered with ESPN and the WNBA on music campaigns on broadcasts and in person in 2025.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Michael Jordan. The way he went about his business on and off the court, I haven't seen anyone come close to his overall body of work."

EA SPORTS

STEVE SCHNUR WORLDWIDE PRESIDENT OF MUSIC

A pioneer in the intersection of music and video games who is "responsible for the tone, curation, production, music marketing and evolution of every note" in EA Sports franchises from *Madden NFL* to *F1*, Schnur and his team curated the Madden Bowl during 2025's Super Bowl weekend in New Orleans, starring Chris Stapleton, Shaboozey, Jelly Roll and Trombone Shorty. "It's the latest chapter in an ongoing music platform we've built that defies genre expectations and brings cross-cultural celebration not only to the EA Sports brand but to the football fan community," says the Muhammad Ali and Jack White fan.

EMPIRE

PETER KADIN EXECUTIVE VP OF MARKETING

After significant partnerships with the Golden State Warriors and San Francisco 49ers in recent years, San Francisco-based EMPIRE teamed with the San Francisco Giants in April 2025 and "curated their music programming and helped promote their new music-themed jersey with Nike," Kadin says. "This opened the door for our artists to appear in team content, get sync placements, throw first pitches, perform [at] and attend games. It was a powerful, locally driven marketing initiative."

FAVORITE ARTIST "I'd say currently Clipse. I've been a fan throughout their entire career, and watching them pull off something remarkable 25 years in, with [a Grammys] album of the year nomination, has been incredible."

EPIC

MILES CATALANO VP OF SYNC MARKETING

"I'm incredibly proud to have helped deepen the relationship between BIA, the WNBA and ESPN," Catalano says. The rapper's "We on Go" track "was used in promos for the entire season," including during the playoffs and the WNBA Finals, and she also opened the All-Star Game with a televised performance. "Music and sports are all about drama, excitement and the full scope of human emotion," Catalano says. "We find the connective tissue of those elements to elevate fan experiences for all parties."

FAVORITE ARTIST "Jerry Garcia. His world-building and storytelling are unmatched."

ESPN

CURTIS FRIENDS VP OF SPORTS MARKETING

ESPN produced and launched Travis Scott's "4X4" music video on top of Mercedes-Benz Stadium at the 2025 College Football Playoff National Championship in Atlanta, getting the chart-topping song a major look for its video. In his role, Friends also helped orchestrate Pharrell Williams' partnership with the NBA. "At our best, ESPN Sports Marketing provides a field full of passionate sports fans for artists and their music," he says. "Music elevates the intensity and feel of the sport, and the sport provides one of the best ways for fans to discover music."

FANATICS

MICHAEL RUBIN CEO

In 2025, Rubin continued to fuse his passions for music and sports through Fanatics and its marquee annual event, Fanatics Fest. A hub for sports enthusiasts and collectors alike, Fanatics Fest draws athletes from leagues including the NBA, NFL and MLB while seamlessly incorporating artists into the experience; the three-day 2025 event in New York featured headline-making appearances from Travis Scott, Jay-Z, DJ Khaled and more. Later in the year, Rubin hosted his second Casino Night in Atlantic City, N.J., in support of the nonprofit REFORM Alliance, bringing together athletes and musicians to raise over \$20 million toward transforming the justice system. "Seeing the level of star power and influence that came to the event and united around criminal justice reform was a powerful reminder of what's possible when we come together for meaningful change," he says.



Fanatics' **MICHAEL RUBIN** (second from right) brought together celebrities **TOM BRADY, ELI MANNING, ROBERT KRAFT** and **DJ KHALED** (from left) at the 2025 Fanatics Fest in New York.

FORMULA 1

STEFANO DOMENICALI PRESIDENT/CEO

In recent years, Formula 1 has leveled up from niche sport to global phenomenon with a heavy-hitting presence in music and entertainment — exactly what Domenicali envisioned when he became CEO in 2021. From expanding numerous Grands Prix in host cities all over the world to include festival-style concert events (with 2025 headliners including Elton John, Foo Fighters and Pitbull) to increasing the cultural recognition of the sport through *F1: The Movie* and its *Billboard*-charting soundtrack, F1 has found immense success by tapping into Domenicali's philosophy that "in this journey, music is not an end in itself, but rather a language capable of amplifying who we are."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Michael Jordan, who marked an era not only for what he did on the court but for the cultural and value-based impact he was able to generate."

FONDAZIONE MILANO CORTINA 2026

MARIA LAURAIASCONE CEREMONIES DIRECTOR

As the 2026 Milano Cortina Winter Olympics kicked off, all eyes were on Iascone's work, which she says aims to create "deep, shared emotions and lasting memories" by "amplifying emotion, shaping memory and translating the Italian spirit into a universal language the world can feel, not just watch." That includes partnering with Italian artist Dardust on the official soundtrack, *Fantasia Italiana*, which she calls "a musical journey across Italy."

FAVORITE ARTIST "Elton John. He's been my favorite pop star since my teenage years, and I learned English by reading his lyrics line by line."

THE SPORTS ISSUE

FYI GROUP/FYI SPORTS

TAMMY BROOK FOUNDER

Brook brokered a partnership between Mike WiLL Made-It and the NBA on ESPN in which the superproducer created original music for a promotional campaign that premiered on the jumbotron ahead of a Los Angeles Lakers game, with Mike WiLL, Latto, Swae Lee and Different Breed helping to debut the song and sitting courtside. She's also worked with Travis Scott to amplify his Cactus Jack HBCU Classic baseball game for the past three years. "I've spent over two decades building platforms where athletes move like artists and artists move like athletes," she says, "aligning them with brands and institutions that sit at the intersection of culture, creativity and community."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Michael Jordan. He was a legend on the court, broke barriers, believed there was no glass ceiling at such an early age and has been defining trends for the past 30 years."

LEWIS HAMILTON

FORMULA 1 DRIVER/FILM PRODUCER

After earning acclaim for winning a record-tying seventh Formula 1 world championship in 2020, Hamilton went on to become the sport's unofficial ambassador in the world of entertainment — a role that culminated in him co-producing and consulting on *F1: The Movie*, which he has said is "as authentic a racing movie has ever been." The 2025 film — in which he also makes a cameo alongside fellow drivers Max Verstappen, Lando Norris and more — helped F1 become more recognizable than ever, particularly in the United States, where the movie grossed \$189.6 million and its soundtrack, featuring Tate McRae, Doja Cat and Ed Sheeran, among others, reached No. 13 on the Billboard 200.

ISLA MANAGEMENT

SIMON GEBRELUL FOUNDER

See story, page 34.

INTERSCOPE CAPITOL

DAVID NIEMAN SENIOR VP OF SPORTS AND GAMING

NATASHA ZEMLIN DIRECTOR OF SPORTS AND GAMING

ROB LEVIN VP OF SPORTS AND GAMING

Interscope Capitol partnered with Complex for an activation at the 18th hole of the Waste Management Phoenix Open in February, which included exclusive merchandise; performances by mgk, Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani; backstage content; and a VVIP speakeasy in collaboration with cocktail brand Gin & Juice. The company also connected Rob49 with the Indiana Pacers; Lady Gaga with F1; mgk with ABC college football; and Yungblud and Aerosmith with WWE WrestleMania for theme songs and network anthems, while Kendrick Lamar owned the Super Bowl halftime show.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Denver's very own John Elway."

—Nieman

JESSE COLLINS ENTERTAINMENT

JESSE COLLINS FOUNDER/CEO

DIONNE HARMON PRESIDENT

SETH DUDOWSKY EXECUTIVE VP/HEAD OF SPORTS AND LIVE CONTENT

Jesse Collins Entertainment produces musical extravaganzas that also serve as cultural touchstones, from Kendrick Lamar's 2025 Super Bowl halftime performance to Beyoncé's 2024 Christmas NFL halftime show in Houston. But Harmon says October's pregame show at the Game 1 of the World Series — the first to be played in Toronto in 32 years — with Pharrell Williams and the choir Voices of Fire stands out. It "became a powerful moment of international unity," she says. "Our job is to help our partners across sports and music create experiences that honor the tradition and scale of the event while making sure the music feels right for the moment. When it works, it becomes something people truly remember."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Michael Jordan, hands down. He's played and dominated multiple sports at the elite level. Don't get me started on the sneakers — I have more Jordan 1s than I can count!"

—Harmon

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON

RAPPER

BASKETBALL PLAYER

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Johnson continues to command attention on and off the court. A projected top five pick for the WNBA draft in April, the LSU Tigers star — who helped the team win the 2023 national title — entered her senior season with championship aspirations and even bigger musical ambitions. Over the summer, Johnson added a gold medal at the FIBA World Cup to her résumé, released her EP *One of a Kind* and took the ESPYs stage alongside hip-hop legend Busta Rhymes. These moments further cemented her growing footprint across sports and music. "I do both at a high level," she says. "I'm bridging the two and building a business where I get to celebrate both."

FAVORITE ARTIST "J. Cole. Overall, his lyricism is top-tier and untouchable. His impact is undeniable, and he just speaks real lyrics that I can genuinely relate to."

From left: BMI's **BARBARA CANE** and **MICHAEL STEINBERG**, Denver Broncos player **COURTLAND SUTTON** and Milk & Honey's **LUCAS KELLER** and **DAVE FRANK** at a game in 2024.



RICH PAUL (left) with client DRAYMOND GREEN at a Golden State Warriors game in 2023.

TRAVIS KELCE JASON KELCE

NFL SUPERSTARS

CO-HOSTS

NEW HEIGHTS PODCAST

Adding to the podcast's illustrious guest list in 2025, Taylor Swift sat down for a rare interview with the brothers (Travis is now her fiancé) heading into her blockbuster *The Life of a Showgirl* album; to date, the two-hour chat has racked up over 24 million views on YouTube. Other special guests who have joined the Super Bowl champion brothers on the pod include Adam Sandler, Deion Sanders, Matt Damon, Caitlin Clark and The Rock. In retirement, Jason has expanded his role covering the NFL for ESPN, and while Travis' Kelce Jam paused for 2025, the music festival is promising a "bigger, better and more unforgettable" experience for Kansas City fans when it returns in 2026.

KLUTCH SPORTS GROUP

RICH PAUL FOUNDER/CEO

Since Paul launched KLUTCH in 2012, such decorated athletes as Jalen Hurts, Anthony Davis and Myles Garrett have joined LeBron James as agency clients. Paul's influence has even seeped into the music world, as he made an appearance on Babyface Ray's *The Kid That Did It* album in 2024. "Music and sports influence each other constantly, from how athletes express themselves to how brands and fans connect emotionally," Paul says. "I work in my role to make sure athletes are positioned authentically within that cultural conversation."

FAVORITE ARTIST Jay-Z. The way he speaks has resonated with me throughout different stages of my life, and over time our relationship has grown into a real brotherhood."

MILK & HONEY MUSIC + SPORTS

LUCAS KELLER FOUNDER/CEO

DAVE FRANK HEAD OF SPORTS AND ARTIST MANAGEMENT

In 2025, Milk & Honey Music + Sports proved it knew how to engineer lasting cultural moments. "What started as a niche songwriter/producer management company has evolved into a multifaceted entertainment company," Keller says. "There's a real camaraderie among musicians and athletes, and we have created a company to exploit this intersection." Over the summer, the boutique agency orchestrated Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce's viral walk-out appearance alongside Morgan Wallen at the country superstar's Arrowhead Stadium show on his *I'm the Problem* tour. In addition, the company's top DJ client, Dance/Mix Show Airplay chart-topper Oliver Heldens, hosted the Indianapolis 500 driver introduction ceremony, where he also performed.

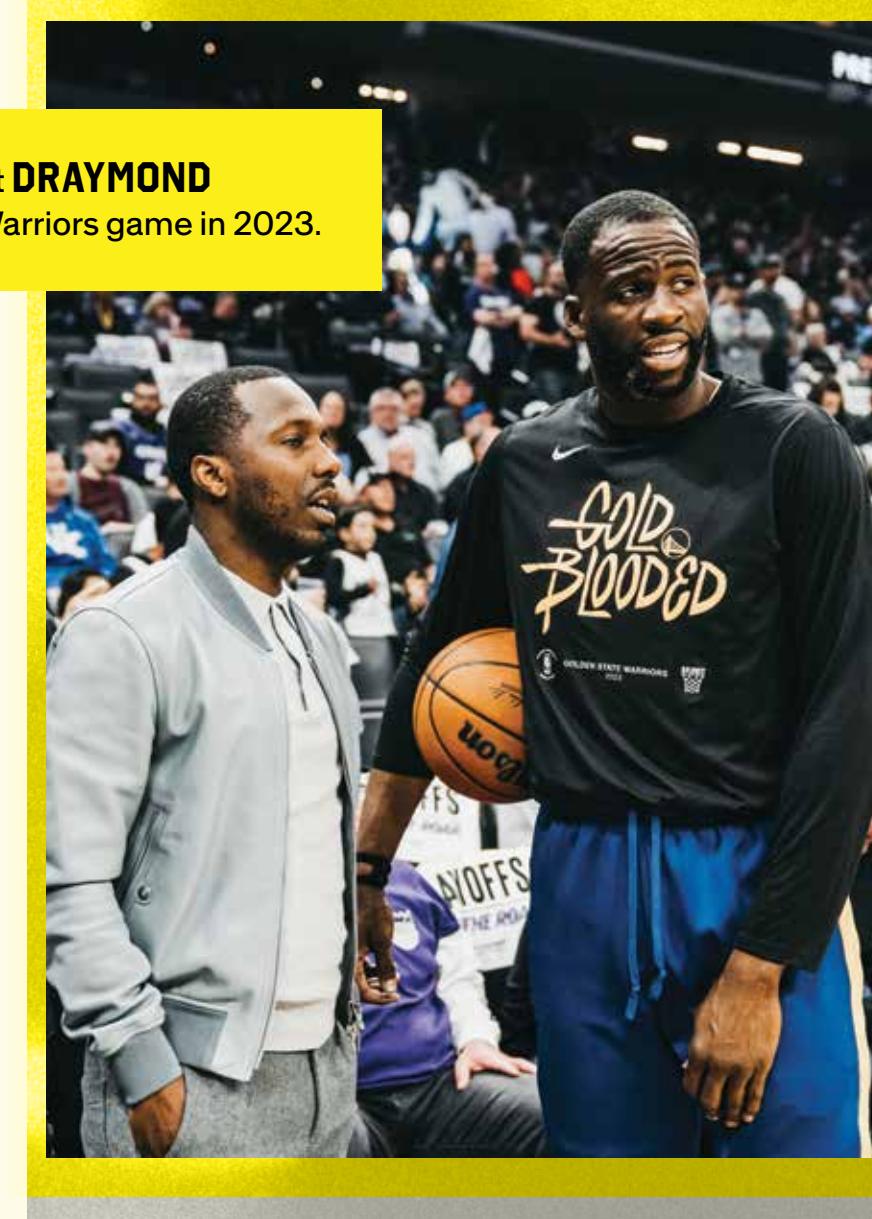
FAVORITE ARTIST "Sting. Nobody did it better. Through every decade, from The Police to the solo records, I love it all!" —Keller

NASCAR

TIM CLARK EXECUTIVE VP/CHIEF BRAND OFFICER

NASCAR has deep roots in Nashville, and over the past year, country stars including Dustin Lynch, Jordan Davis, Gretchen Wilson and Zac Brown Band have entertained racing fans, with Miranda Lambert scheduled to play the Daytona 500 on Feb. 15. However, Clark says he's most proud of "the diversity of sound and performers" recently promoted by NASCAR — from Whiskey Myers' performance at Talladega Superspeedway, to Killer Mike featuring on the soundtrack to the *NASCAR 25* video game, to Demi Lovato and Pitbull delivering showstopping performances at the Daytona 500 the past two years.

FAVORITE ARTIST "Otis Redding. Zero bad songs in his catalog — just one incredible song after another, all in just 26 years."



MLB

KEN KRASNER SENIOR VP OF MARKETING AND ENTERTAINMENT

STEPHANIE SCARPULLA VP OF GLOBAL MUSIC PARTNERSHIPS AND MUSIC AND MEDIA CLEARANCES

The World Series starts only a few days after its two participants clinch their respective pennants — which means that Krasner and Scarpulla have to hustle each year to help coordinate championship-level music programming. When the Los Angeles Dodgers and Toronto Blue Jays squared off last fall, Krasner says that he and Scarpulla worked closely with Jesse Collins Entertainment to bring in Pharrell Williams and Voices of Fire for the U.S. and Canadian national anthems. "To see it come to life with 500 American and Canadian performers uniting on-field at Game 1 of the World Series in Toronto was a truly proud and special moment," Scarpulla says.

FAVORITE ARTIST "Eddie Vedder. He's a master lyricist and his voice exudes raw emotion. And he's a legitimate die-hard baseball fan," —Scarpulla

NBA

JASMIN MARQUEZ SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING AND MUSIC BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Marquez has prioritized "bringing the NBA closer to culture and lifestyle through music" since assuming her role in 2022 through licensing strategies connected to marquee events like the league's Emirates Cup and All-Star Weekend. She says her proudest achievement of the past year was securing "world-class talent" for the league's award-winning Larry O'Brien Trophy NBA Road to the Finals campaign, including rock legends Billy Idol and Aerosmith and contemporary trendsetters J Balvin and Cynthia Erivo.

FAVORITE ARTIST "Prince. His mastery of multiple instruments and fearless blending of genres make him a true innovator and one of the most influential artists in music history."

THE SPORTS ISSUE

NBA 2K

DAVID KELLEY

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS AND LICENSING

Kelley looks at each iteration of the NBA 2K video game as a "living and evolving platform," one that rolls out new music — from artists like Kendrick Lamar, Blur, Larry June and more — every six weeks, with refreshed in-game content, major-label songs and a curated selection of tracks from NBA 2K26 cover star and reigning NBA MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. "My drive stems from the desire to craft the perfect soundtrack for life's most competitive and creative moments," Kelley says. "At 2K, I have the opportunity to bridge these worlds."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Mike Tyson. He has gone from ultimate badass to bad guy and humbly climbed back up the road again to become who he is today. Legend."

NETFLIX

BRANDON RIEGG

VP OF NONFICTION SERIES AND SPORTS

On Christmas Day 2024, Netflix hosted its first NFL Christmas Day game, featuring a halftime performance by Beyoncé and a prerecorded opening by Mariah Carey, who sang her record-breaking No. 1 hit "All I Want for Christmas Is You." The streaming service continued the tradition in 2025 with an opening performance by Kelly Clarkson of "Underneath the Tree" and a Snoop Dogg-headlined halftime show, where the rapper was joined by Lainey Wilson as well as EJAE, Audrey Nuna and Rei Ami — the voices of the girl group HUNTR/X from Netflix's blockbuster animated musical *KPop Demon Hunters*.

FAVORITE ARTIST "My short list includes Aerosmith, Beastie Boys, Rage Against the Machine, Nirvana and Eminem."

NFL

TIM TUBITO

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL EVENT PRESENTATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

The NFL has taken the game global in recent years, bringing football to different territories across Europe, South America and, later in 2026, Australia. Wherever the league goes, Tubito sees it as a priority for the NFL to use music to amplify the emotion of the game and unite the communities being represented. "Whether it's bringing Karol G to São Paulo, producing a New Orleans-themed Super Bowl pregame celebration or curating a music-driven NFL draft in Green Bay [Wis.]," he says, "the goal is to use music to deepen engagement, connect with the local audience, resonate with global audiences and reach new demographics to expand the cultural reach of the sport."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Nick Mangold. I had the privilege to work with him for the duration of his career at the Jets, watching him develop into an all-time great on the field and a strong leader. But most importantly, he was an excellent man with a great sense of humor and always treated everyone with kindness and respect."

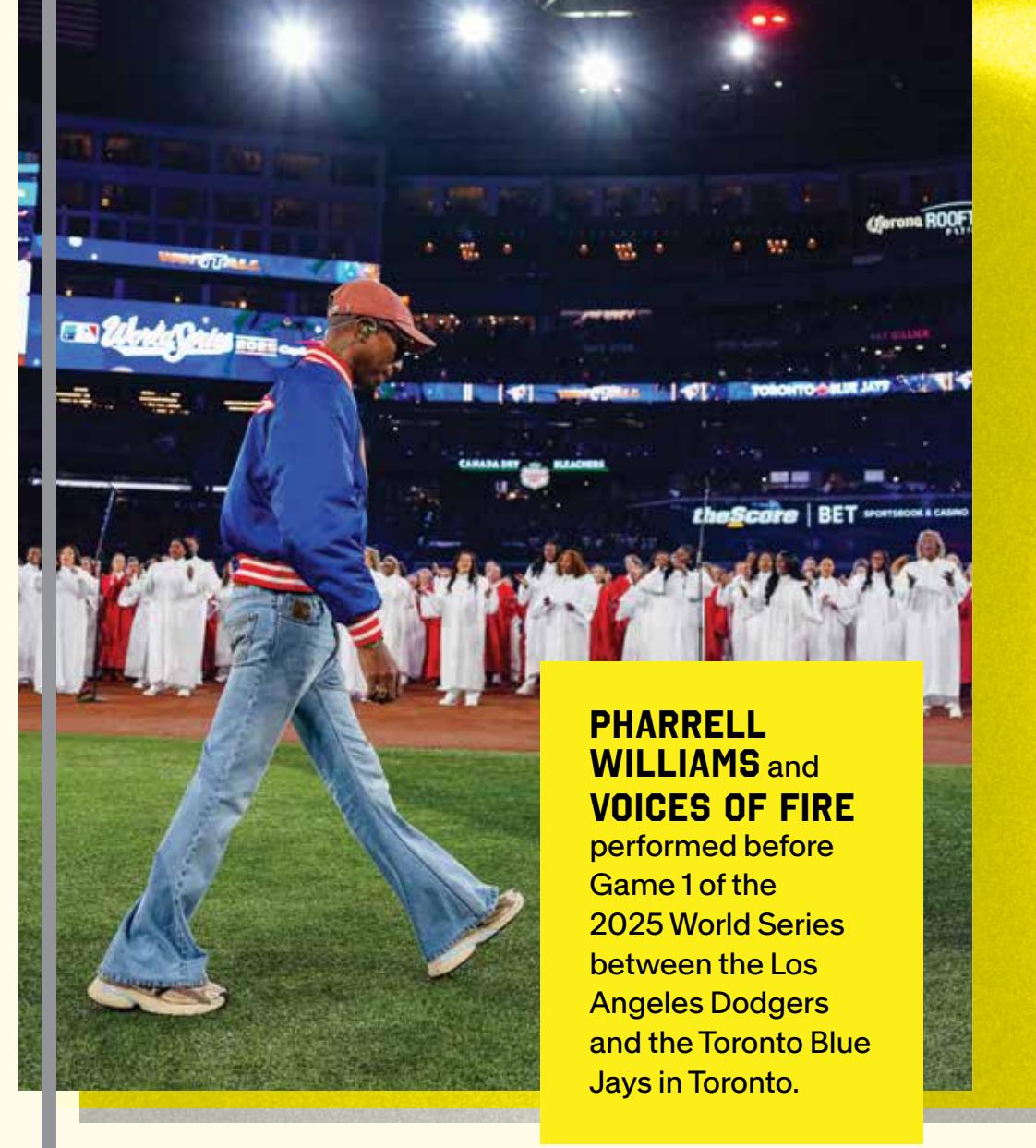
NHL

STEVE MAYER

PRESIDENT OF CONTENT AND EVENTS

Mayer and the league struck gold when Twenty One Pilots stole the show at the NHL Stadium Series in March with a homecoming gig at Columbus' Ohio Stadium. The fiery mini-concert during the Blue Jackets-Red Wings game drew rave reviews from fans inside The Horseshoe (as the venue is called) and watching at home. "Music adds value to our events, games and content and provides an energy that takes our sport to another level," Mayer says.

FAVORITE ARTIST "Having grown up in New Jersey, it's Bruce Springsteen. I am happy to admit I have seen him in concert over 200 times."



BRAD PITT

ACTOR/FILM PRODUCER

As a producer and star of *F1: The Movie*, Pitt worked closely with the film's partners within Formula 1 to showcase the sport's unfathomably high speeds and intense pressures up close — and in doing so, introduced a larger global audience to racing while further bolstering its presence in entertainment and music. In 2026, the Apple Original movie is up for best picture, editing, sound and visual effects at the Academy Awards after serving as the flagship collaboration between Apple and F1, which late in 2025 entered an exclusive five-year deal that they promise will partially encompass music through the tech company's leading streaming service.

ANGEL REESE

BASKETBALL PLAYER

HOST

UNAPOLOGETICALLY ANGEL PODCAST

Not only did Reese dominate the basketball court last season, earning her second consecutive WNBA All-Star appearance, but she solidified herself as a dynamite host for her unfiltered podcast, *Unapologetically Angel*. Reese chatted with heralded musicians including Kehlani, Victoria Monét, Ciara, Common and Wale, as well as athletes such as Ty Young and LiAngelo Ball and sports journalists like Taylor Rooks. "*Unapologetically Angel* has become a space to tell real stories, share different perspectives and connect through culture, music and lived experience — not just sports," Reese says. "Sports is my foundation, but music is the energy that fuels how I train, compete, show up and tell my story."

FAVORITE ARTIST "Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. They're two of the greatest in the game and completely unapologetic about who they are. Their music makes me feel confident, powerful and fully myself — like there are no limits on what I can do."

REPUBLIC COLLECTIVE

JOSEPH "JP" PINEDA

HEAD OF SPORTS PARTNERSHIPS AND MARKETING

REPUBLIC Collective partnered with the Chicago Sky as its official music partner, "making WNBA history," Pineda says. He also adds that a notable highlight was The Weeknd's collaboration with MLB for the 2025 World Series, in which the singer's hometown Toronto Blue Jays played, which "spanned across broadcast, to social, to content production, to real-world merch all in just a matter of days."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Steph Curry. He's transformed the game, is an assassin on the court and has a killer instinct. He's never afraid to take the last shot. And most impressively, he does so while staying humble and family-focused. You never see him in the headlines for the wrong reasons."

ROC NATION

SHAWN "JAY-Z" CARTER

FOUNDER/CHAIRMAN

DESIREE PEREZ

FOUNDER/CEO

JANA FLEISHMAN

EXECUTIVE VP OF COMMUNICATIONS AND STRATEGY

JUAN PEREZ

FOUNDER/PRESIDENT

ROC NATION SPORTS

Roc Nation has maintained a robust management division, serving both artists like Alicia Keys and Big Sean and athletes like LaMelo Ball and Kyler Murray. But since partnering with the NFL in 2019, Roc Nation's marquee event has been the Super Bowl halftime show, which it books and executive-produces. The 2025 edition with Kendrick Lamar was the most-watched of all time with 133.5 million viewers, while 2026 headliner Bad Bunny will make history as the first halftime performer ever to sing only in Spanish. "Executive-producing Emmy Award-winning halftime shows that are defining cultural moments is the ultimate bridge between sports and music," Desiree Perez says.

SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

JESSICA SHAW

SENIOR VP OF SYNC LICENSING

In 2025, Shaw scored a CBS Sports sync with Natasha Bedingfield's 2004 hit, "Unwritten," for NCAA March Madness promos and a partnership with ESPN's *Monday Night Football* to air Queen songs for the 50th anniversary of *A Night at the Opera* album. A San Diego Padres-turned-New York Yankees fan who roots for Duke University's basketball team, Shaw says, "It was a privilege to be involved in the creative process behind the scenes." For her, the future involves Queen: "I can't wait to see what new creative opportunities lie ahead for an artist so aligned with the sports world."

TRAVIS SCOTT

ARTIST

Scott's affinity for the intersection of sports and music continued in 2025 through a partnership with WWE, spanning its premium live events Elimination Chamber and WrestleMania 41. At the latter, Scott played a role in John Cena securing his record-setting 17th world championship, while his Hot 100-topping single "4x4" served as the official theme for WWE's flagship show, *Monday Night Raw*. Beyond the ring, Scott also returned to the baseball diamond, teaming up with the Houston Astros for his third annual Cactus Jack HBCU Classic game.

UTA

ALISANN BLOOD

CO-HEAD OF GLOBAL MUSIC BRAND PARTNERSHIPS

TYLER STIMMEL

AGENT, MUSIC BRAND PARTNERSHIPS

"One of our core functions is to connect artists, athletes and brands to create moments that feel authentic and impactful," Blood says. In 2025, Blood worked with the Jonas Brothers, Mastercard and Stand Up 2 Cancer on a partnership that launched with a music video and content premiere during the MLB All-Star Game broadcast in July and culminated in a performance at the World Series in October. Stimmel coordinated The Kid LAROI's NFL Berlin halftime performance, where he played to a crowd of more than 60,000 fans.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Jim Abbott. He was born with no right hand and watching him pitch a no-hitter live against the Cleveland Indians in '93 and the resilience and grit in how he played that game made me a lifelong fan of his and the Yankees." —Blood

THE SAVANNAH BANANAS

ZACK FRONGILLO

DIRECTOR OF ENTERTAINMENT

The Savannah Bananas exhibition baseball team has perfected the nexus of sports and entertainment — with a heavy emphasis on entertainment. Whether it's artists like Russell Dickerson, Kane Brown or Train's Pat Monahan participating in pregame festivities or the individual players coordinating their own dances to popular tunes, "we found that music is the heartbeat of our show," Frongillo says. During July's sold-out game at Boston's Fenway Park, "we pulled off a full halftime show [with The All-American Rejects] featuring a three-song mashup that included our players, the Bananas Pep Band and full choreography. It opened up a whole new world of what's possible for live-music integration in our show."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Dustin Pedroia. How he approached the game and his work ethic was always inspiring."

THE SAVANNAH BANANAS have incorporated music and artists into their game-day routines, including **RUSSELL DICKERSON** (foreground) last April.



THE SPORTS ISSUE

VICTOR VICTOR

STEVEN VICTOR FOUNDER/CEO

Victor names his Victor Victor x Timberland collaboration, with its campaign featuring Detroit Lions wide receiver Jameson Williams and Motor City MC Babyface Ray, as one of his proudest accomplishments from the past year, which also included his label's signing of rising rage rap star Prettifun. Victor also steered Pusha T through a high-profile Def Jam split, which gave way to his *Billboard* chart-topping, five-time Grammy-nominated comeback as one-half of Clipse last summer. Notably, the brother duo supported *Let God Sort Em Out*, which they mostly recorded at Louis Vuitton HQ, with adidas and Carhartt collaborations.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Niki Lauda, because of his unparalleled courage, technical genius and relentless determination."

WARNER RECORDS

CLAUDIA BUTZKY

EXECUTIVE VP/HEAD OF BRAND PARTNERSHIPS AND CREATIVE SYNC

Butzky helped link Dua Lipa with the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders for an onstage performance of her song "Physical" during Dua's tour stop in Dallas on her *Radical Optimism* tour, with the cheerleaders spending the day before with the singer learning the choreography for the number. She also helped land Linkin Park's "Heavy Is the Crown" in an NHL campaign that aired during the Stanley Cup Final. "When it's done right, it feels organic, culturally relevant and impactful for fans on every side," she says about her work.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Roger Federer. Not only because of his undeniably incredible talent but also for his poise and sportsmanship."

WASSERMAN

CASEY WASSERMAN

CHAIRMAN/CEO

KELLEN BENJAMIN

EXECUTIVE VP OF TALENT SALES AND MARKETING

TODD PALMERTON

VP OF EVENT CREATION AND MANAGEMENT

WASSERMAN MUSIC

Wasserman had major skin in the game at Super Bowl LIX last February as the agency represents players from both the Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas City Chiefs, along with Kendrick Lamar, whose lauded halftime show performance was the most watched of all time. "Our clients are the culture-shapers, and it's our job to architect experiences that help elevate them," Wasserman says. "Whether it's incorporating a notable music element into a major sporting event or aligning star athletes with top artists, it's about creating collisions that feel natural, yet innovative and fresh."

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Bo Jackson. He just felt different — watching Bo made you believe anything was possible with hard work and talent." —Palmerton

WWE

NICK KHAN

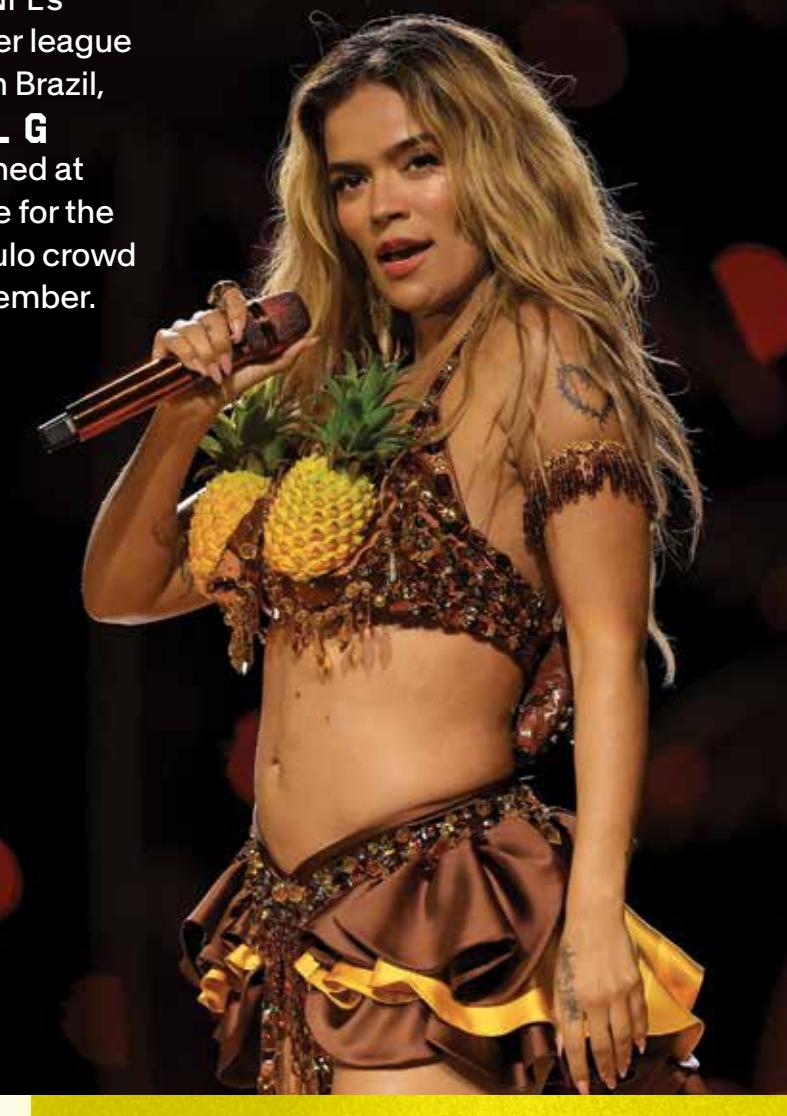
PRESIDENT

BOARD MEMBER

TKO

WWE's expansion into the music space accelerated in 2025 through collaborations with Travis Scott, Cardi B and Jelly Roll. Scott's Hot 100-topping "4x4" served as the official theme for *Monday Night Raw*, while his involvement extended to *WrestleMania 41*, where he played a role in John Cena capturing a record-setting 17th world championship. That momentum continued at *SummerSlam* at New Jersey's MetLife Stadium, where Jelly Roll made his in-ring debut and Cardi B opened the show as the event's official host — underscoring WWE's growing synergy with music culture.

At the NFL's first-ever league game in Brazil, **KAROL G** performed at halftime for the São Paulo crowd in September.



YOUTUBE

ANGELA COURTIN

VP OF SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT MARKETING

Courtin oversaw the "successful execution" of the first NFL live game on YouTube from Corinthians Arena in São Paulo in September, which integrated creators into the live broadcast for the first time. The game also showcased what she calls a "Super Bowl-level performance" by Karol G during the halftime show of the 2025-26 season opener, which featured a matchup between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Los Angeles Chargers. Performers also included Brazilian artist Ana Castela, who sang the country's national anthem, and saxophonist-composer Kamasi Washington, who played the U.S. national anthem.

FAVORITE ATHLETE "Troy Aikman. I am a die-hard Cowboys fan, and he played 12 seasons and delivered three Super Bowl titles. He's also an Oklahoma boy."

CONTRIBUTORS

Katie Bain, Hannah Dailey, Kyle Denis, Chris Eggertsen, Steve Knopper, Carl Lamarre, Jason Lipshutz, Taylor Mims, Melinda Newman, Isabela Raygoza, Dan Rys, Mike Saponara, Andrew Unterberger

METHODOLOGY

This cross-section of powerful people working at the intersection of sports and music was compiled through outreach to record labels, talent agencies, management companies, media platforms, streaming services, sports leagues and more, and selected by the *Billboard* editorial team.



HANCHER AUDITORIUM IS HONORED TO BE A BILLBOARD TOP MUSIC VENUE!

We are grateful to serve touring artists, our community, and future fans on the University of Iowa's creative campus.

Pictured: Nickel Creek (photo by Jason Smith)



DANIEL SORABJI/GETTY IMAGES

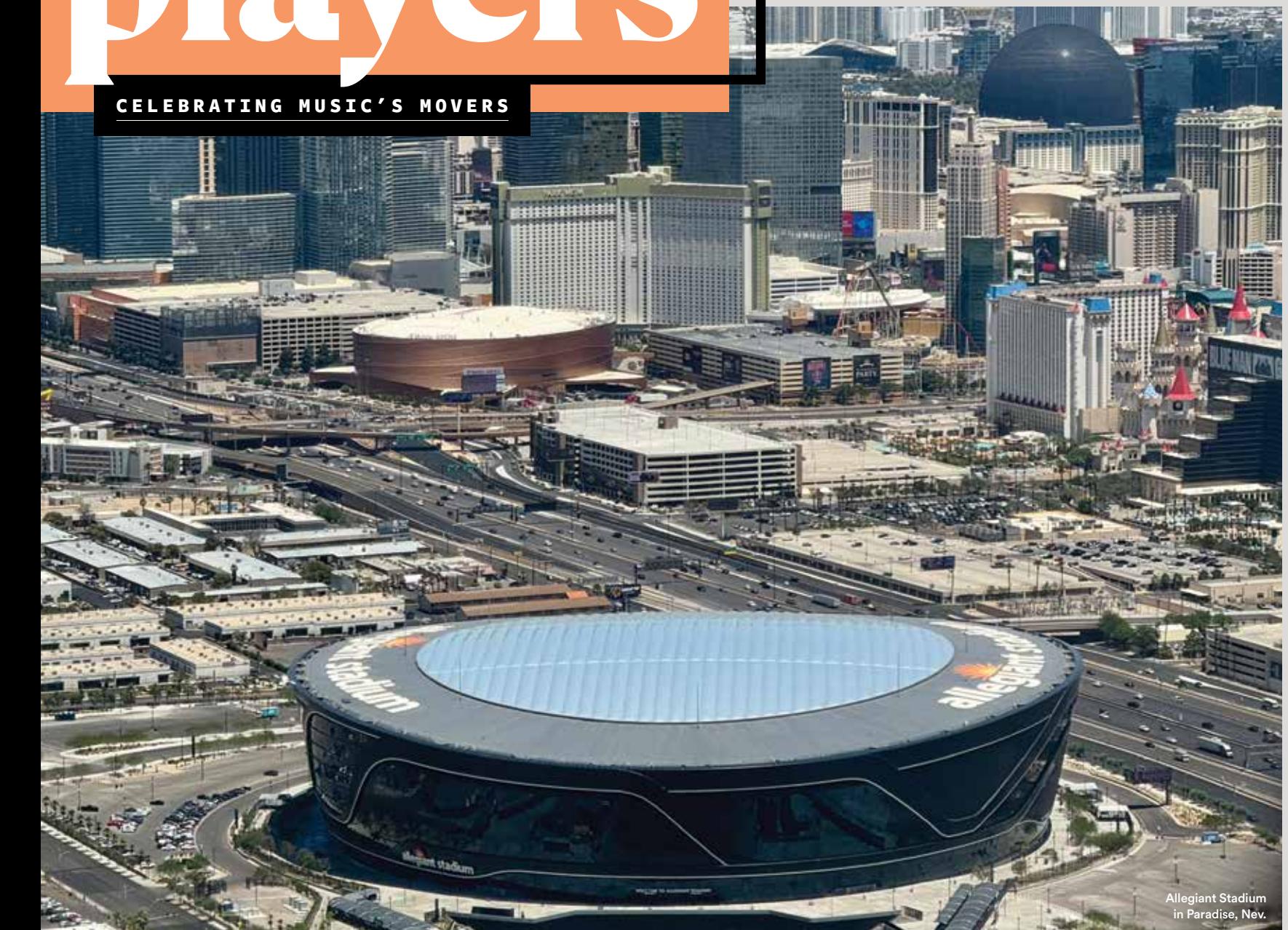
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players

CELEBRATING MUSIC'S MOVERS



Allegiant Stadium in Paradise, Nev.

2026 TOP MUSIC VENUES

Bad Bunny's history-making residency, the Dead's golden anniversary, Electric Daisy Carnival's biggest Mexico edition — all took place in music locales celebrated on this year's list [BY DAVE BROOKS](#)

DRRAWING ON BOTH editorial insight and hard data from Billboard Boxscore, this report identifies 28 venues that define the live-music experience today — the rooms that artists dream of playing and fans flock to for unforgettable nights.

From stadiums and arenas to open-air amphitheaters and intimate clubs, these picks are organized by region and venue type, with special nods to fan-favorite spots that give each city its own pulse. Think of it as a guided tour of the places where sound, setting and community collide — the stages that turn concerts into memories and local music scenes into legends.

Gross and attendance figures, where included, reflect numbers reported to Billboard Boxscore from Oct. 1, 2024, to Sept. 30, 2025.

TOP WEST COAST STADIUM

Allegiant Stadium (Paradise, Nev.)
71,835 capacity

In the past year, Allegiant Stadium has hosted The Weeknd's After Hours Til Dawn tour, Coldplay's *Music of the Spheres* run, Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter* outing, Kendrick Lamar and SZA's Grand National trek and Shakira's record-breaking *Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran* world tour. Allegiant's sleek domed shell is wrapped in a striking black-and-silver facade, and the 65,000-seat venue features a retractable natural grass "tray" on its field for NFL games along with movable walls that open to reveal views of the Las Vegas Strip. Inside, its design is a touring artist's dream with state-of-the-art acoustics and massive LED screens. Conveniently located just off the Strip in the city

of Paradise, Nev., the building ranked as the top-grossing U.S. stadium on Boxscore's year-end chart.

TOP CENTRAL U.S. STADIUM

Soldier Field (Chicago)
61,500 capacity

Soldier Field offers one of the Windy City's most dramatic concert stages. In the past year, the home of the Chicago Bears has welcomed performances by Beyoncé, Blackpink, Oasis and My Chemical Romance, while its 2015 *Fare Thee Well* Grateful Dead tribute remains legendary. Architecturally, the stadium, which originally opened in 1924, fuses its neo-classical colonnades — echoing a Roman amphitheater — with a modern interior rebuilt in 2002. Road crews praise its generous backstage space,

solid rigging and adaptive layout for stadium-size productions. Less than a mile from Grant Park and framed by skyline views and tree-lined promenades, Soldier Field is more than a stage — it's a U.S. National Historic Landmark.

TOP EAST COAST STADIUM

MetLife Stadium (East Rutherford, N.J.)
82,500 capacity

Even in a metropolitan region known for its world-class stadiums, MetLife stands out thanks to its sheer booking power and size, routinely hosting the New York area's biggest concerts across the Hudson River in New Jersey. Unlike New York's two baseball stadiums, MetLife is available nearly all summer thanks to the NFL's winter schedule and, with a capacity of 82,500, it can hold far larger crowds than any other venue in the region. In 2025, MetLife was the second-highest-grossing stadium in the United States, netting \$238 million from 31 concerts. The venue features a number of modern concert amenities including high-definition video boards, cutting-edge LED lighting and modern load-in docks that allow for elaborate stage productions of all sizes. Best of all, it has public transit connections via rail or bus to Manhattan.

TOP INTERNATIONAL STADIUM

Estadio GNP Seguros (Mexico City)
55,000 capacity

Estadio GNP Seguros, formerly Foro

Sol, is a crown jewel of Latin America's concert circuit. It regularly tops Billboard Boxscore's top stadiums chart and, in the past year alone, has hosted stars including Shakira, Stray Kids, ATEEZ and Oasis. Built for music from the ground up, the 55,000-capacity venue offers unobstructed views and efficient staging. Locals love its accessibility and its starring role in major festivals like Vive Latino, which marked its 25th anniversary last March. The stadium's surrounding Iztacalco neighborhood hums with street food, culture and urban energy — a true reflection of Mexico City's musical heart.

TOP CANADIAN STADIUM

Rogers Centre (Toronto)
49,282 capacity

Known for its signature retractable dome — one of the few at a stadium in North America — Rogers Centre allows artists to tailor their shows with flexible stage configurations. In the past year, it has hosted stadium-level tours by The Weeknd, Jonas Brothers, Morgan Wallen and My Chemical Romance. Recent renovations have improved sightlines, upgraded concessions and enhanced production versatility. Touring professionals respect its dependable infrastructure while locals love its prime downtown location — steps from the CN Tower and Toronto's bustling entertainment district, where music, dining and nightlife connect for one seamless experience.

TOP U.S. FESTIVAL LOCATION

Golden Gate Park (San Francisco)
100,000 capacity

Golden Gate Park's Polo Field is both a San Francisco treasure and one of America's most coveted concert sites. In the past year, the park has hosted Dead & Company's 60th-anniversary run and the Outside Lands festival featuring Tyler, The Creator and DoeChii. The open-grass bowl, framed by trees and skyline views, offers natural sightlines, flexible staging and a festival-proven power grid. Situated between the Richmond and Sunset districts, the park connects neighborhoods filled with cafes, bike paths and cultural life. Golden Gate Park delivers song, skyline and serenity.

TOP INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL LOCATION

Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez (Mexico City)
48,988 capacity

When the organizers of the dance mega-festival Electric Daisy Carnival decided to expand the event to Mexico, it made sense to choose a venue that, like EDC's flagship show in Las Vegas, also serves as an iconic racetrack. Built in 1959, Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez has hosted races by NASCAR, Formula 1 and Grand Prix and, in more recent years, has been transformed into a concert site as well. Operated by the leading Mexican promoter OCESA, Autódromo Hermanos

Rodríguez hosted the launch of EDC Mexico in 2014, with the latest version of the now annual event grossing \$29.9 million. Other large-scale, multigenre fests like Emblema, Corona Capital and Coca-Cola Flow Fest also take place at the venue.

TOP WEST COAST ARENA

Sphere (Las Vegas)
18,600 capacity

Sphere has redefined what a concert venue can be — a true game-changer for live entertainment. Its 580,000-square-foot LED exterior and 16,000-pixel wraparound interior screen create a fully immersive environment for guests. Acts like U2, Dead & Company and Phish have used the custom-built Dolby Atmos sound system and motion-mapped visuals to create shows that exist nowhere else. Touring professionals call it the new benchmark for production design while locals love its easy access just off the Strip. Sphere isn't just a venue — it's where the future of live performance unfolds in real time.

TOP CENTRAL U.S. ARENA

American Airlines Center (Dallas)
20,020 capacity

American Airlines Center serves fans in one of the nation's most powerful concert markets. Dallas has become a must-play stop for major tours and the AAC sits at the center of that boom. In the past year, the arena has hosted Dua Lipa, Mexican rock band Maná, Tate McRae and more top-tier acts. The arena combines modern design with fan-friendly comfort, featuring sleek interiors, premium suites and pristine acoustics. Touring pros praise its smooth load-ins, reliable rigging and efficient production layout. Surrounded by bars, restaurants and the city's arts district, the arena embodies the energy of a thriving live-music city.

TOP EAST COAST ARENA

Kaseya Center (Miami)
19,500 capacity

Kaseya Center is a staple on global tour routing. In the past year, the arena has hosted major acts like Dua Lipa, Lady Gaga, Maxwell and Katy Perry. The glass-and-steel structure houses a flexible interior that expands from 12,200 to 19,500 in capacity. With luxury suites, club seating and panoramic bayfront views, it offers both spectacle and intimacy. Perfectly placed among financial district Brickell, the Design District, the arts-filled Wynwood neighborhood and Biscayne Bay, Kaseya anchors Miami's nightlife and culture — a place where world tours meet waterfront glamour.

TOP INTERNATIONAL ARENA

O2 Arena (London)
21,000 capacity

The O2 Arena has long set the global standard for live entertainment. Since opening in 2007, it has frequently topped Billboard Boxscore rankings with precision production and elite performance. Over the past year, Lady Gaga, Lil Baby and Katy Perry have graced its stage, confirming its reputation as a must-play stop for touring stars. The O2's ringed dome design, adjustable staging and immaculate acoustics make it a technical favorite while the arena complex, on the Greenwich Peninsula, offers an array of shopping, bars and restaurants.

TOP WEST COAST AMPHITHEATER

Ford Amphitheater (Colorado Springs, Colo.)
8,000 capacity

The Ford Amphitheater first opened its gates in August 2024 with a roster of shows including Cage the Elephant and a three-night sold-out run by OneRepublic. In its first two seasons, the flagship facility of live-entertainment development company VENU has also welcomed Miranda Lambert, Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit, Dwight Yoakam, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, The Black Keys and Godsmack with the help of promoter AEG Presents. The open-air venue is also home to an array of upscale dining options including Roth's Sea & Steak, Brohan's and Bourbon Brothers' Smokehouse & Tavern. (VENU, which allows fans to invest in local entertainment venues in tertiary markets, is expected to open three more amphitheaters later this year, with the goal of 25 amphitheaters and 15 indoor entertainment complexes by 2030.)

TOP CENTRAL U.S. AMPHITHEATER

Tuacahn Amphitheatre (Ivins, Utah)
2,000 capacity

Carved into the red stone walls of Padre Canyon, Tuacahn Amphitheatre delivers pure desert magic. The intimate venue has hosted Mat & Savanna Shaw, KC & The Sunshine Band and the Southern Utah Blues Festival featuring Ghost Town Blues Band. Its stage blends seamlessly with the surrounding cliffs, creating natural acoustics and breathtaking visuals. Locals treasure Tuacahn for the touring Broadway shows in summer and concert nights under the stars year-round. Just west of St. George, it offers small-town warmth and world-class production in a cinematic landscape.

TOP EASTERN U.S. AMPHITHEATER

St. Augustine Amphitheatre (St. Augustine, Fla.)
4,700 capacity

St. Augustine Amphitheatre (nicknamed The Amp) may only hold 4,700 people, but its impact is oversized. Over the past year, The Amp has hosted Wilco with Wachatchee, The Avett Brothers, Chicago and Willie Nelson. Built into a former coquina quarry and covered by a tensile canopy, The Amp combines coastal air, crisp acoustics and clear sightlines from every seat. It is located near a farmers market and food vendors in a walkable neighborhood close to Anastasia State Park. The result is a concert setting that feels both relaxed and electric — Florida charm with global reach.

TOP CANADIAN AMPHITHEATER

RBC Amphitheatre (Toronto)
15,000 capacity

In the city whose musical legacy runs from Gordon Lightfoot to Drake, the RBC Amphitheatre has operated under the title sponsorship of the Royal Bank of Canada only since October. But the history of the beloved venue, with its views of the Toronto skyline, stretches back to the opening of the waterfront Ontario Place development in 1971, when it was known first as the Molson Amphitheatre and then Budweiser Stage. Live Nation has announced plans to close the open-air venue for renovations in the fall of 2027, with a reopening in spring of 2029 and a transformation to a year-round facility by the summer of 2030.

TOP WEST COAST CLUB OR THEATER

Revolution Hall (Portland, Ore.)
850 capacity

Revolution Hall is one of Portland's most



Shaboozey at The Pinnacle in Nashville in 2025.

and precision-tuned acoustics. Over the past year, it has hosted major events like Lorde's Ultrasound show, Phoebe Bridgers' homecoming stop and massive electronic and indie showcases. Touring teams love its clear sightlines, top-tier production gear and efficient load-ins, while fans gravitate toward its waterfront location at The Wharf. With bars, restaurants and sweeping views of the Potomac, The Anthem sits at the heart of a vibrant neighborhood that hums late into the night.

TOP VENUE UNDER 500 CAPACITY

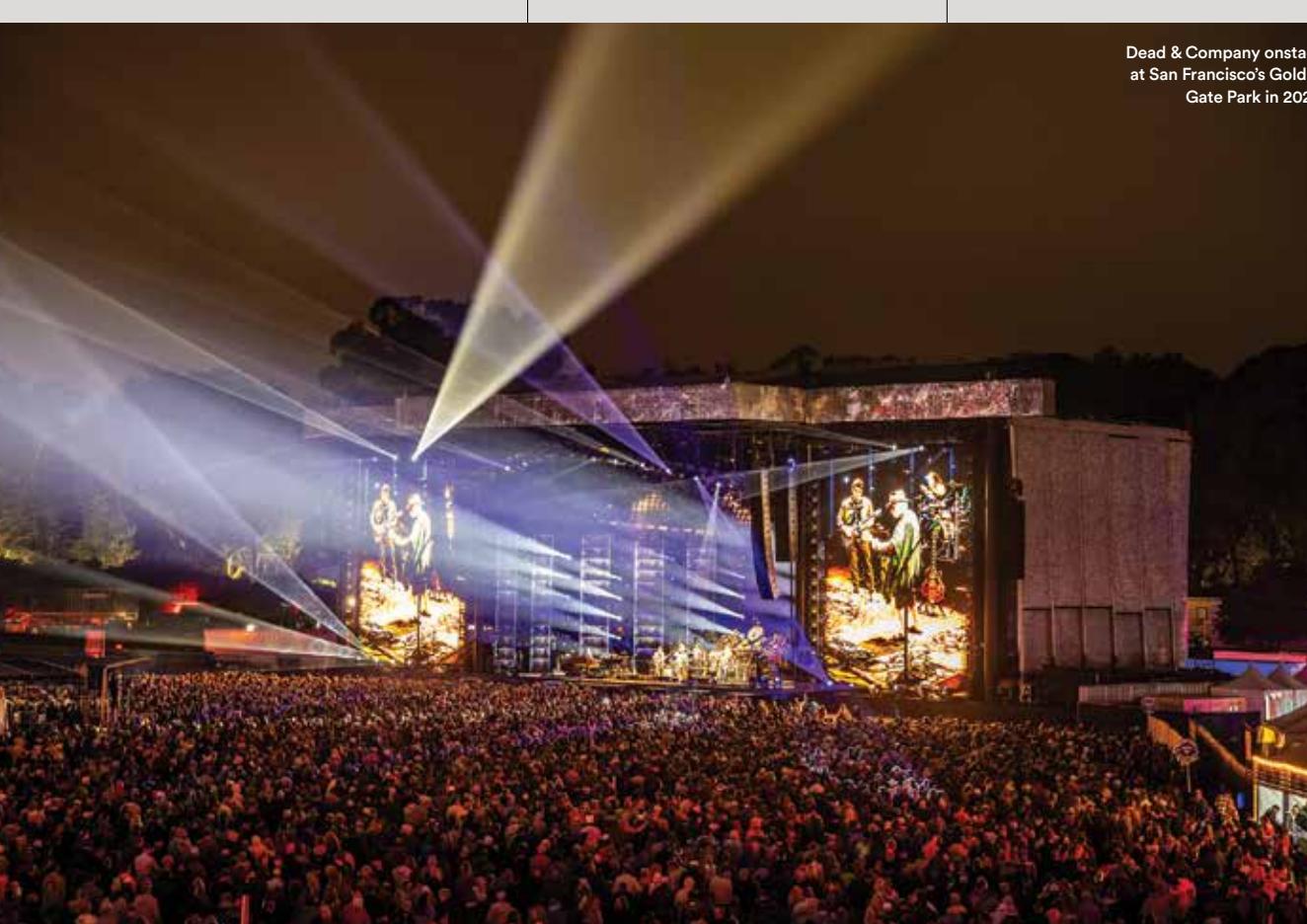
Bearsville Theater (Woodstock, N.Y.)
300 capacity

Bearsville Theater is a Hudson Valley gem, rich with Woodstock's musical spirit and artistic legacy. Set on a 16-acre campus, the venue pairs rustic charm with top-tier production — its restored barn interior accented by warm wood beams and a Meyer Sound system that delivers acoustic clarity. In the past year, it's hosted Todd Rundgren, The Lemon Twigs, Dean Wareham and Bruce Hornsby. Touring acts praise its sound and hospitality, while fans love its cafe, riverside paths and the laid-back vibe of the creative Catskills community.

TOP RESIDENCY VENUE

Coliseo De Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot (San Juan)
18,500 capacity

Affectionately known as "El Choli" by locals, Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot opened in 2004 and has become a rite-of-passage venue for Latin stars, hosting top artists like Rauw Alejandro and Karol G, alongside icons such as Paul McCartney and Lady Gaga. Situated in the heart of San Juan's Milla de Oro, the arena — a structure resembling a peaked cap and spanning 5.2 acres — is the largest



indoor entertainment venue in the Caribbean. In 2025, global superstar Bad Bunny launched a historic 30-show residency, *No Me Quiero Ir De Aquí*, which attracted over 250,000 visitors and contributed \$400 million to Puerto Rico's economy while boosting its global profile.

THE 'WOW' FACTOR

The Caverns (Pelham, Tenn.)
2,500 Capacity

The Caverns is a venue carved from the earth itself. Deep underground at the base of the Cumberland Plateau, the natural amphitheater hosts acts like Everclear, Neko Case, Jeff Tweedy and Michael W. Smith, as well as festivals like CaveFest featuring Sam Bush and Leftover Salmon. Its limestone walls and vaulted ceilings produce natural reverb that feels otherworldly, while the above-ground amphitheater offers room for larger shows. Touring crews appreciate its acoustics and atmosphere, and locals embrace the setting's mystique. Surrounded by rural Tennessee hills, The Caverns transform every concert into an elemental adventure.

TOP BUCKET LIST VENUE

Beacon Theatre (New York)
2,900 capacity

The Beacon remains one of New York's most treasured concert halls. Built in 1929, its ornate Art Deco facade and glowing marquee recall another era of showmanship. Inside, the room dazzles with tiered balconies, intricate plasterwork, a grand chandelier and acoustics perfected for live performance. Over the past year, it's hosted Ray LaMontagne, Gillian Welch, Wilco

and dozens more. The Beacon offers lots to love for touring professionals, including its intimate scale, historic prestige and flawless production environment. It is conveniently located on Manhattan's Upper West Side — surrounded by brownstones, cafes and cultural landmarks. For artists and audiences alike, the Beacon has been serving magic for close to a century.

BEST CONCEPT

Preservation Hall (New Orleans)
125 capacity

Preservation Hall is the soul of New Orleans in its purest form. Tucked along St. Peter Street in the French Quarter, it's surrounded by cobblestone streets, wrought-iron balconies and the sound of brass bands echoing from nearby corners. Inside, the tiny, timeworn room — with its cracked plaster walls, wooden benches and low ceilings — holds barely a few dozen people, yet the energy is electric. For multiple shows each night, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and special guests fill the space with music that transcends eras and lean into its decades of musical history. While many small venues tailor their bookings to the zeitgeist, Preservation Hall has remained true to its acoustic jazz roots and continues to celebrate the sounds that put New Orleans on the map.

LOCAL FAVORITE

Pabst Theater (Milwaukee)
1,500 capacity

The Pabst Theater in Milwaukee stands as a living legend, seamlessly balancing heritage and innovation. Its German Renaissance-revival facade, twin balconies,

proscenium arch and 1,339-seat hall exude old-world grandeur. Touring insiders prize its warm acoustics, vintage charm and modernized production systems, while artists appreciate its efficient backstage flow. In the past year, it's hosted Gillian Welch & David Rawlings, Steve Earle & The Dukes and Goo Goo Dolls — proof that it remains as relevant as ever. Locals cherish it as the centerpiece of East Town's downtown arts district, surrounded by restaurants, nightlife and Milwaukee's creative heartbeat.

KEEPING IT INDIE

Hancher Auditorium (Iowa City, Iowa)
2,685 capacity

The Hancher Auditorium has become a quiet powerhouse for indie touring in the Midwest. The venue perfectly balances concert hall precision and intimate energy, hosting artists like Stereolab, Jason Isbell and Neko Case. The indie darling boasts flawless acoustics, an adjustable lighting grid and impeccable sightlines, while its supportive atmosphere and smooth logistics make it a must-play stage for performers. The auditorium is located near the University of Iowa, drawing both a co-ed crowd and other fans who can enjoy preshow strolls along the Iowa River and/or stops at nearby cafes and galleries. Hancher connects the energy of Iowa City's creative community to the greater live-music world.

BEST FOOD AND MUSIC PAIRING

Garcia's (Chicago)
350 capacity

Garcia's in Chicago has quickly become a must-visit for fans who love their concerts

with a side of culinary flair. Opened in 2025 by Peter Shapiro (who staged the Fare Thee Well concerts for Grateful Dead fans in 2015 and founded the Brooklyn Bowl venues), the venue-restaurant celebrates Jerry Garcia's spirit with mid-century modern design, psychedelic art and a stage framed in wood and memorabilia. Over the past year, it has hosted Grahame Lesh & Friends, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, Grace Potter and The Travelin' McCourys. Touring artists love its Meyer Sound system, multitrack recording rig and artist-first layout. Concertgoers can indulge in signature cocktails, a custom menu and an immaculate neighborhood.

MOST UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE

Spirit Of The Suwannee Music Park (Live Oak, Fla.)
45,000 capacity

Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park transforms live sound into a full-sensory journey. Set on 800 moss-draped acres along the Suwannee River in Live Oak, midway between Jacksonville and Tallahassee in northern Florida, the site has hosted events like Hulaween featuring The String Cheese Incident and Goose, Resonate Suwannee with Papadosio and Chromeo, and Roots Revival with Oteil & Friends. The park's multiple stages, shaded clearings and riverside meadows create a setting that feels spiritual and communal. Touring pros admire its infrastructure and layout, while fans cherish its 24-hour culture — from camping and canoeing to spontaneous jam sessions.

MOST ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

UBS Arena (Belmont, N.Y.)
18,500 capacity

UBS Arena has set a high standard for sustainability in live entertainment since it opened in late 2021, some 20 miles east of Manhattan. The arena holds LEED certification through advanced energy systems like LED lighting, heat recovery and high-performance glass. In 2024, it earned TRUE Silver Zero Waste status, diverting over 95% of its waste and recycling or composting more than 1.5 million pounds of material. Water usage is down 40% thanks to low-flow fixtures, and all guest materials are compostable. As it hosts environmentally engaged artists like Billie Eilish, the venue also uses electric ice resurfacers, occupancy sensors and a carbon-reduction fee on concessions — all helping UBS Arena prove that a green future for live music is already here. **b**

Additional reporting by Katie Bain, Thom Duffy, Taylor Mims and Isabela Raygoza.



The UBS Arena has earned LEED certification for its sustainable operation.

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CELEBRATING MUSIC'S MOVERS



Forrest Frank onstage at the Coca-Cola Coliseum in Toronto in 2025.

'SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN'

As Christian music rises in popularity, its touring artists are on a roll

BY JESSICA NICHOLSON

WHEN FORREST FRANK and his booking team at UTA opened up ticket sales for the Christian music singer's 26-city Child of God Tour Part 2 in December 2024, they made a calculated risk — taking the artist from the 2,000- to 5,000-seat standing-room clubs where he had been performing hits including "Good Day" and "Up!" to 6,000 to 7,000 average paid capacity venues that would offer more comfortable seating for the families and younger fans attending his shows.

"We were very intentional about wanting to play smaller arenas," UTA music agent Jonathan Roberts says. Forrest Frank had also just released "Your Way's Better," a catchy pop song that was bolstered by a viral TikTok dance in

2025, resulting in his solo Billboard Hot 100 debut. "All the songs had snowballed. Dickies Arena in Fort Worth [Texas] sold out [12,000 tickets] on day one of the presale," Roberts says. "We couldn't add dates because of certain parameters of time we could work with, so the only thing we could do was find every seat in the buildings we were in and get as many people in as possible."

For the tour stop at Nashville's Bridgestone Arena in April 2025, that meant opening upper levels. "We had the intention of only playing the lower bowl, up to the 200 level, because that still would have been 8,000 people," Roberts says. "We ended up with 13,000 people in the building."

According to Luminate's 2025 Year-End Report, the global music industry earned 5.1 trillion on-demand audio

song streams, rising 9.6% from 2024. The Christian music genre outpaced the industry's general growth, rising 18.5% in on-demand global audio song streams in 2025 compared with 2024.

Several Christian artists have found themselves in the middle of the genre's commercial swell.

In May 2025, two Christian music songs appeared on the Hot 100 simultaneously for the first time in 11 years: Forrest Frank's "Your Way's Better" and Brandon Lake's "Hard Fought Hallelujah." After first releasing a solo version of "Hard Fought Hallelujah," Lake teamed with country artist Jelly Roll for a collaborative version, vaulting the song into the Hot 100's top 40. Christian artist Josiah Queen, who is booked by the Jeff Roberts Agency, also made his Hot 100 debut in 2025 with "Dusty Bibles," as

GINNY YURICH WITH 1000 HOURS OUTSIDE, JASON & EMILY MORROW WITH REALLY VERY CRUNCHY, THIS WAY HOME FEATURING DUSTIN & SARAH LOLLI - 1000 HOURS OUTSIDE REALLY VERY CRUNCHY WORTHY TOUR ● ACCESSMORE PRESENTS LISA HARPER'S BACK PORCH THEOLOGY TOUR WITH ALLISON ALLEN & DR. JIM HOWARD ● PHIL WICKHAM, CHARITY GAYLE, JOSH BALDWIN & BENJAMIN WILLIAM HASTINGS - AIR1 WORSHIP NOW TOUR ● ELEVATION RHYTHM, GIO., MARCUS BLACK - AIR1'S DARE TO DREAM - LIVE WITH PURPOSE YOUTH EVENT ● AN EVENING WITH ANNE WILSON ● THE STARS TOUR FEATURING ANNE WILSON & JORDAN ROWE ● BAPTIZE CALIFORNIA 2025 ● BENJAMIN WILLIAM HASTINGS - AT THE HEART OF IT TOUR ● BETHEL MUSIC: WORSHIP & MINISTRY NIGHTS ● BRANDON LAKE, FRANNI CASH, PAT BARRETT - KING OF HEARTS TOUR ● LAKEHOUSE PRESENTS: THE RECORD REVEAL FROM KING STREET WITH BRANDON LAKE ● CANDACE'S LIVE TOUR: AN EVENING WITH CANDACE CAMERON BURE ● CECE WINANS - MORE THAN THIS TOUR ● CHRISTMAS WITH CECE WINANS FEATURING ANGIE WINANS & DEBBIE WINANS ● CHARITY GAYLE - THE REJOICE! TOUR ● A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS LIVE ON STAGE ● WORSHIP UNDER THE STARS WITH CHRIS TOMLIN ● CHRISTMAS WITH CHRIS TOMLIN AND SPECIAL GUEST JAMIE MACDONALD ● JARON MYERS, SHAMA MREMA, MIKE GOODWIN - THE CHURCH COMEDY TOUR ● AN EVENING OF WORSHIP WITH CHRIS TOMLIN ● DANNY GOKEY - THE SOUND OF HEAVEN - AUSTRALIA TOUR ● 56TH ANNUAL GMA DOVE AWARDS ● DUDE PERFECT - SQUAD GAMES TOUR ● NIGHT OF DREAMS ● ELEVATION RHYTHM - THE GOODBYE YESTERDAY TOUR ● ELEVATION WORSHIP & STEVEN FURTICK - ELEVATION NIGHTS TOUR SPRING 2025 ● ELEVATION WORSHIP & STEVEN FURTICK - ELEVATION NIGHTS TOUR FALL 2025 ● FORREST FRANK: CHILD OF GOD TOUR PART 2 ● FRANNI CASH LIVE! ● GABBY'S DOLLHOUSE LIVE! ● GAITHER VOCAL BAND - LOVE LIKE I'M LEAVING TOUR 2025 ● GAITHER HOMECOMING 2025 ● GAITHER HOMECOMING CHRISTMAS TOUR 2025 ● I STILL BELIEVE IN CHRISTMAS - AN EVENING WITH ANNE WILSON ● JOSIAH QUEEN, STRINGS & HEART - MY PROMISED LAND TOUR ● JOSIAH QUEEN - MT. ZION ALBUM RELEASE SHOW ● KIM WALKER-SMITH AND LEELAND - THE TESTIFY TOUR ● KIRK CAMERON - STRONG FAMILIES, STRONG COMMUNITIES TOUR ● LECRAE, MILES MINNICK, AND GIO. - RECONSTRUCTION WORLD TOUR ● LINDSEY STIRLING - THE SNOW WALTZ TOUR ● MERCYME LIVE 2025 WITH NATALIE GRANT AND SAM WESLEY ● MADISON RYANN WARD - THE STANDING TALL TOUR ● MERCYME, TOBYMAC, & BALDWIN, CHRIS EKISS - WORSHIP IN THE HEART

JESUS SAVES

MATTHEW WEST ● JOSH MADE FOR MORE TOUR ● WITH BENJAMIN WILLIAM HASTINGS ● LYSY TERKEURST & TASHA LAYTON - TRUST AGAIN TOUR SPRING 2025 ● LYSY TERKEURST & TASHA LAYTON - TRUST AGAIN TOUR FALL 2025 ● A NIGHT IN NASHVILLE WITH GRACIE BINION ● LET ME SEE JESUS WORSHIP NIGHTS WITH MATT REDMAN ● MATTHEW WEST - COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS LIVE ON TOUR ● MERCYME LIVE AT RED ROCKS ● MERCYME LIVE 2025 WITH ZACH WILLIAMS & SAM WESLEY ● MICAH TYLER - GOD DID IT TOUR FT. JORDAN ST. CYR AND EMERSON DAY ● CHAD VEAH, DAWNCHERÉ WILKERSON, AODHÁN KING, BROOKE LIGERTWOOD, SAMMY RODRIGUEZ, PASSION MUSIC, RICH WILKERSON JR., DOE, CHRIS HODGES, MARK PETTUS, JILL PETTUS, AND MOTION WORSHIP - MOTION CONFERENCE 2025 ● NINJA KIDZ LIVE: INFINITE POSSIBILITIES ● PHIL WICKHAM, CODY CARNES, AND KRISTIAN STANFILL - SINGALONG TOUR 2025 ● WORSHIP NIGHTS WITH PHIL WICKHAM ● PHIL WICKHAM'S SONG OF THE SAINTS ALBUM RELEASE EVENT ● PHIL WICKHAM'S SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHRISTMAS TOUR ● HALLELUJAH! IT'S CHRISTMAS! WITH PHIL WICKHAM AND FRIENDS ● RED ROCKS WORSHIP - THE KING IS COMING TOUR PT. 2 ● ROCK THE SMOKIES WITH SKILLET, ZACH WILLIAMS, ALEXANDER PAPPAS, MICAH CHRISTOPHER, IVEY ASHER, SANSONE & JOY GREEN ● SEPH SCHLUETER AND JAMIE MACDONALD - COUNTING MY BLESSINGS TOUR ● SEPH SCHLUETER AND BODIE - COUNTING MY BLESSINGS TOUR ● STEVEN CURTIS CHAPMAN - SPEECHLESS '25 ● STEVEN CURTIS CHAPMAN - THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS TOUR ● PHIL WICKHAM, BRANDON LAKE, AND JOSIAH QUEEN - SUMMER WORSHIP NIGHTS ● TAYA, JOE L BARNES, LEELAND, TIFFANY HUDSON, MACK BROCK - COME INTO THE LIGHT TOUR ● THE BIBLE RECAP LIVE WITH TARA-LEIGH COBBLE 2025 ● CHOIR ROOM - CHOIR IS BACK TOUR 2025 ● SKILLET, ANNE WILSON, COLTON DIXON, KB, NEWSONG, MICAH TYLER, ZANE BLACK, SEU WORSHIP, THE BAND TABLE, & WE ARE VESSEL - WINTER JAM 2025 ● MATT REDMAN, SCOTT CUNNINGHAM, W. DAVID O. TAYLOR, MATT MAHER, JOSH BALDWIN, JOSH AARON, GLENN PACKIAM, BROOKE LIGERTWOOD, SCOTT LIGERTWOOD, JOE L BARNES, & DAVID FUNK WOR/TH FALL 2025 ● WORSHIP IN THE HEART WITH DANNY GOKEY ● WORSHIP IN THE HEART WITH MATT MAHER ● PASSION MUSIC, THE BELONGING CO., BENJAMIN WILLIAM HASTINGS, JOSH BALDWIN, CARLOS WHITTAKER, GLENN PACKIAM, AND ROBBIE SEAY - WORSHIP TOGETHER CONFERENCE 2025 ●

did Phil Wickham with "What an Awesome God." Forrest Frank released his *Child of God II* project in May 2025, reaching No. 1 on Top Christian Albums and No. 12 on the Billboard 200. In June, Lake released *King of Hearts*, which peaked at No. 7 on the Billboard 200 and No. 1 on Top Christian Albums. Lake followed "Hard Fought Hallelujah" with such songs as "Sevens" and a featured performance on Queen's three-week Christian Airplay No. 1, "Can't Steal My Joy."

UTA, which launched its Christian music division in 2024 and represents artists including Forrest Frank, Lake, Wickham, Lecrae, Elevation Worship, Elevation Rhythm and bodie, has seen that uptick in consumption translate to wins on the road.

Average attendance for Forrest Frank's shows nearly tripled from 2024 to 2025, rising from 2,840 to 8,320, as part of his *Child of God Tour Part 2* arena trek, which included sold-out shows in Nashville; Anaheim, Calif.; and Tulsa, Okla.

Lake's 2024 tour dates brought an average of 8,199 attendees per show, while his 2025-26 *King of Hearts* tour has drawn an average of 11,436 to date. Lake and Wickham's co-headlining Summer Worship Nights run drew 10,325 average attendance per show in 2024 and rose to an average of 16,823 in 2025.

"Ever since I got back into [venues] after 2020, it felt like there was something that broke open, that has not changed, just a hunger in the church for the presence of God, a longing for real connection with each other in God," Wickham says. "It doesn't feel like I'm preaching that from the stage, hoping people will respond. It feels like people are preaching it back to me with their faith in the room. I'm joining a wave of what's happening and it's so beautiful."

For UTA agent Nick Barnes, who leads the agency's Heartland initiative (a group focused on shared values of community, faith and family), a few other moments that signaled the genre's influence on mainstream culture happened backstage at the Bridgestone Arena shows on Forrest Frank's *Child of God Tour Part 2* and the Lake-Wickham trek.

"I noticed the amount of crossover musicians, celebrities, actors, artists that were backstage, wanting to hang in the culture," Barnes says. "When you see that, you know the tide is turning."

WME partner of Christian music Mark Claassen says, "A big part of this is the breaking down of genre walls, especially with Gen Z. Their playlists consist of Christian and worship songs mixed right in with country, hip-hop, pop, alternative and more. It's just not separated or segmented the way it was in the '90s and 2000s."

Genre mainstay artists such as Tomlin and tobyMac, who are booked by Platform Artists, have long headlined at storied venues such as Kia Forum in Los Angeles and Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheatre. But Claassen notes that historically, younger and newer Christian artists were limited to headlining church venues or Christian colleges. That has changed, as agencies have increasingly worked with not only established Christian music promoters such as Awakening Events and TPR but also Live Nation and AEG.

"We are in a season where all concert promoters are seeing the value and ticket sales and want to

work with these artists, all the way down to local independent clubs and theaters," Claassen says.

After his *Child of God Tour Part 2* ended in May, Forrest Frank continued releasing a deluge of songs that reached the top 10 on *Billboard's* Hot Christian Songs chart, including "Nothing Else" (featuring Thomas Rhett), "God's Got My Back" and "Lemonade" (with The Figs).

All those hits primed the recent on-sale for his 29-city *The Jesus Generation Tour* presented by TPR, which launches in June. Forrest Frank will play a mix of arenas and outdoor stadiums, including Nashville's GEODIS Park (23,000 capacity), Pennsylvania's Hersheypark Stadium (30,000) and Arlington, Texas' Globe Life Field (35,000) while arena stops will feature in-the-round seating. Roberts estimates that over 500,000 tickets have already been sold for the tour.

Awakening Events founder and CEO Dan Fife has also witnessed the growth in the genre. Among the promoter's current tours are tobyMac's *Hits Deep Tour*, Seph Schlueter's *Counting My Blessings* trek and Chris Tomlin's annual Good Friday Nashville event (which, in 2024, set the record for the largest ticketed Christian concert at Bridgestone Arena with 15,889 attendees). According to Awakening, last year it promoted 355 shows, selling over 820,000 tickets, with 2026 projections to be over 400 shows.

"This has been my primary genre for the past 25 years and it's been fun to see the growth," Fife says. "It's a genre where radio is still as important as streaming. Between the [digital service providers] and some of the great radio networks out there, that's one plus one equals three situation."

WME launched its Christian division, WME CMG, more than 10 years ago and has seen its touring income nearly double since 2018, largely due to more arena tours from clients including Lauren Daigle, Kirk Franklin, worship collective Maverick City Music, MercyMe and Crowder. (Former Maverick City Music members Chandler Moore and Naomi Raine are now signed as solo artists with WME.)

From 2023 to 2025, WME CMG continued having steady growth, from booking 800 shows with 3.3 million in attendance in 2023 to booking over 900 shows in 2025 with over 4 million attendees.

WME's Claassen points to the beginning of Daigle's 2020 global tour — which was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic — as a turning point. "At that time, no artist coming directly out of the Christian music space had reached that level of ticket counts or grosses," Claassen says. "We were selling out arenas at on-sale. That tour was doing comparable business to artists like Carrie Underwood and the Jonas Brothers, which made it clear this wasn't niche growth anymore. It was mainstream-level demand."

According to WME, gospel music artist Kirk Franklin and Maverick City Music's 50-city Kingdom Tour in 2022 marked a major milestone by grossing over \$1 million for individual shows.

"Combining the biggest gospel act of all time with the hottest [contemporary Christian music] and worship act at that moment hit at exactly the right time. It felt like a true crossover of worlds, where everyone in the room felt welcome, and it

TOP CHRISTIAN ARTISTS

1. **Forrest Frank**
2. **Brandon Lake**
3. **Elevation Worship**
4. **Josiah Queen**
5. **Phil Wickham**
6. **CeCe Winans**
7. **Lauren Daigle**
8. **Anne Wilson**
9. **Ye**
10. **Leanna Crawford**

Top Christian Artists ranks the best-performing acts of the chart year based on activity on the Top Christian Albums and Hot Christian Songs lists, as well as *Billboard* Boxscore. The 2025 tracking period ran from Oct. 26, 2024, to Oct. 18, 2025.

became a never-been-done-before kind of show," says Mike Snider, partner, Christian music at WME.

Like their Gen Z and Gen Alpha fans, today's rising and established artists are social media-savvy, harnessing TikTok, Instagram and other platforms to promote their music, with more faith-based songs finding homes on secular playlists.

Over the past several years, artists ranging from Ye to Florida Georgia Line and Carrie Underwood have released faith-inspired music or albums. Barnes predicts the next several months will have more mainstream artists entering the contemporary Christian music space: "They're inviting people into the CCM world [to be] themselves, and that's working."

Christian artists have also increasingly made appearances at mainstream festivals in recent years, with NF and Daigle playing Lollapalooza, Lake performing at CMA Fest, Anne Wilson performing at Stagecoach and Franklin appearing at All Points East. Forrest Frank will perform at RodeoHouston this year, and Christian artists Caleb Gordon, 1KPhew, whatuprg, Anike, Nathan Davis Jr. and JAN will play hip-hop sets that will open the final day of this year's Rolling Loud festival.

"We've got these artists on our roster that are completely unashamed about who they are and are running headfirst toward it," Barnes says. "That's what's drawing the Gen Z and Gen Alpha kids toward this music, and these kids are looking for something to believe in." ▶

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JOHAN Y SOFI • LINAJE ESCOGIDO • PEQUEÑOS HÉROES • LA REFORMA • HANNAH PONCE
HAURY • MARY PAGÁN • REDIL WORSHIP • HELMER VÉLIZ • BENNY MARTÍNEZ**

SIENNA SPIRO

The rising British artist is proving that caring is cool with "Die on This Hill"

BY HANNAH DAILEY

► Sienna Spiro is headstrong. That much is evident from the title of her breakthrough hit, "Die on This Hill," a dramatic piano-and-string ballad that gave the British singer-songwriter her first Billboard Hot 100 entry in December. She stumbled upon its chords while attempting to learn Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," and lyrics about an unhappy, one-sided relationship soon followed. But, as she says over Zoom in her signature 1960s glam, her tenacity is what made the song such a standout.

Spiro, 20, was eager to add an upbeat song to a catalog of slower tracks, but her co-producers and co-writers, Omer Fedi (The Kid LAROI, SZA, Lil Nas X) and Michael Pollack (Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Maroon 5), ultimately helped convince her not to push the tempo of "Die on This Hill." "I [had] so much resentment and anger," she recalls, "which honestly kind of helped the performance."

"It's a song about being stubborn and caring, which I don't think is spoken about too much," she continues. The track has reached highs of No. 11 on the Billboard Global 200 (Jan. 31) and No. 19 on the Billboard Hot 100 (Feb. 7). "There's been this really big wave of nonchalance, of it being really cool to not care. I think a lot of people aren't like that." Her fans agree: The audio clip of the track's most climactic part — a moment when Spiro's voice cracks as she wails, "I wish something mattered to you" — has been used in over 1 million TikTok videos just a few months out from its release.

Even when her manager, Miriam Maslin, first met Spiro, she recalls being struck by three qualities in particular. "She was super driven, hardworking" — and, of course — "pretty stubborn. I gravitate toward people that have an opinion on something. She's one of the most passionate people I know ... we share the same motivation of having long-term success as opposed to short-term hype." (Maslin discovered Spiro four years ago on TikTok thanks to her cover of FINNEAS' "Break My Heart Again.")

In 2025, Spiro signed a label deal with Capitol Records and a publishing deal with Sony Music. Throughout the year, she and Maslin booked strategic performances to showcase her talent, including a guest appearance at Sam Smith's New York concert in October to duet on "Lay Me Down" and a cover of Miley Cyrus' "The Climb" for Gap's 2025 holiday campaign. On Jan. 7, Spiro performed "Die on This Hill" on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* with a live orchestra and released its black-and-white music video two weeks later, in which she slow-dances with a mannequin that represents the song's emotionally unavailable subject.

And though Spiro admits that she was initially irritated at having to slow down "Die on This Hill" the day she recorded its final version, she loves how it feels to perform now. The hit is sure to be the centerpiece of her upcoming Visitor Tour, a sold-out 16-date trek through North America and Europe starting in March. "It's really hard to sing [live]. But it feels great ... like a rage room for the soul." □

No. 19

PEAK ON THE BILLBOARD
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