

An Excellent A&R

Work Methods & Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to collect information on A&R work by interviewing five A&R's from Finland and the United States. An A&R, short for "artists and repertoire", is a person responsible for scouting talent and guiding artists in a record company. Their role in the music industry is very significant, yet there is very little general knowledge about their line of work. It has maintained the mystique of the music business. Your own taste in music has also most likely been shaped by the tastes of legendary A&R's.

But why do we need them? The music industry has gone through considerable changes and recording and publishing music has become more accessible for everyone. Online data is also easily available, if one wants to find out what is currently trending. All of the interviewees believed that there is a strong psychological side to A&R-work, which is equally as important as the musical side. On top of musical guidance, artists need mentors that understands their highs and lows and can guide them through different parts of their careers.

There is no specific way of becoming an A&R, and it is not one of those careers people aim for or dream of since childhood. All of the A&R's interviewed shared similar goals, but had different methods for reaching them. What all of the A&R's shared was a curious mind and a genuine interest in people, music and what is currently happening in the world. This study aimed to find and highlight the key elements to being an excellent A&R.

Key words: A&R, music business, record label, artist

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1. INTRODUCTION

My personal journey in music started with singing and evolved into songwriting. After graduating as a musician, I continued by studying music production to expand my knowledge. When I understood a bit of what it's about, I started to get curious about how the music business works. My curiosity has led me into peeling the world of music like an onion, and the layers seem never ending. On my quest in understanding the music business, I always bumped into the letter combination A and R. I knew that A&R's were important people who worked with artists, but that's about it. Even my musician friends didn't know what they do and I found quite few articles on the subject. This started to seem odd to me. Are A&R's some sort of secret of the music industry? Why aren't they famous or even somehow known publicly, even though their work seems to be very crucial to the music industry?

I decided I would find out what I can by interviewing A&R's. I explored the subject through literary sources, and created an interview form based on the questions that arose. My thesis aims to be a guide to everyone who is interested in the music business, but doesn't know exactly what A&R's do, what kind of people they are and what their role in the music industry is. I also wanted to find out what kind of role women play in the A&R field. There are A&R's working in music publishing companies as well, but this thesis focuses mostly on record label A&R's. What you are about to read, is a glimpse to the minds of people who have the ability to scout talent, hunch hits, see star quality and make all that turn into success stories.

2. RESEARCH METHOD AND INTERVIEWEES

2.1 Interviewing A&R's

The purpose of this study was to gain information on A&R work. I decided to do a qualitative study with five interviewees. The study was carried out as semi-structured interviews. This means that the questions were the same for everyone, but they weren't necessarily in the same order, and the answers weren't limited to the questions asked. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 47-48.) Two of the A&R's, Ian Hunter and Brett Bassock, were interviewed during Song Castle, an international songwriting camp organized by Music Finland in May 2018. The camp was held at Kallio-Kuninkala estate in Tuusula. All Finnish A&R's were interviewed at their workplaces in Helsinki through November 2018 to May 2019. The interviews were recorded, and afterwards I made notes of them person by person, theme by theme. The interviews varied from thirty minutes to one hour in length.



PICTURE 11. Song Castle group (Töyrylä 2018)

2.1.1 Presenting the interviewees

Ian Hunter

Ian Hunter is the Vice President of A&R at Atlantic Records. He has worked for the Warner Music Group since 2011, and was the first person to have a dedicated A&R research role there. In 2014, Ian Hunter started Atlantic's first A&R Research department. He works with artists and bands such as Melanie Martinez, DJ Matoma, Molly Kate Kestner and Why Don't We. Hunter resides in Los Angeles, California. (Hunter 2018.)



PICTURE 12. Ian Hunter (Hunter 2018)

Brett Bassock

Brett Bassock is a manager and A&R. He is the President of Renegade Publishing and an A&R consult for Atlantic Records. His clients have written songs for artists such as Martin Garrix, Justin Bieber, Bebe Rexha, MGK and many more. Through attending Song Castle, Bassock found connections to Finland, and currently works with Jurek Reunamäki (Kaiku Songs), one of Finland's most established producers and songwriters. Originally from Wilton, Connecticut, Bassock is now based in Los Angeles, California. (Bassock 2018.)



PICTURE 13. Brett Bassock (Bassock 2018)

Niko Kangas

Niko Kangas is the Pop, Rock and Jazz Export Manager at Music Finland. Music Finland is an organization that aims to help Finnish music companies expand their business internationally. The organizations aims to help create international success stories for the Finnish music business. (Music Finland 2019.) This year, Niko Kangas was rewarded as the Organizational Leader of the Year in the Industry Awards Gala. The gala is the respected highlight of the annual Music & Media seminar in Tampere, Finland. (Music & Media Conference 2019.)



PICTURE 14. Niko Kangas receiving a prize at the Industry Awards (Varila 2019)

Marja Kokko

Marja Kokko is the Head of A&R at Universal Music Finland. She is Finland's first female A&R. Kokko started working for Universal Music as an A&R Manager in 2012 and was promoted to Head of A&R in 2015. She works with a multifaceted group of Finnish top-notch artists including Kasmir, Janna, Olavi Uusivirta, Pyhimys, Tuure Kilpeläinen and Vilma Alina. (Kokko 2018.)



PICTURE 15. Marja Kokko (Varila 2019)

Pekka Ruuska

Pekka Ruuska is the CEO of Kaiku Entertainment Ltd. He is one of the trailblazers of music business in Finland, with a record of breaking many Finnish artists (Kangas 2019). Being an accomplished songwriter himself, Ruuska has won the prestigious Juha Vainio Award in 2000, a prize given to a notable Finnish lyricist (Suomen Musiikintekijät 2019). Ruuska works as an A&R and manager for Finnish household names like Juha Tapio, Maija Vilkkumaa and Laura Voutilainen. From November 2018, Kaiku Entertainment has been an independent part of Finnish media house Nelonen Media, which has created a lot of discussion inside the music industry. (Ruuska 2019.)



PICTURE 16. Pekka Ruuska (Kero 2018)

3. WORKING AS AN A&R

A record label is a company that funds recorded music and creates a brand identity for that product. They are responsible for manufacturing, distributing and promoting the records that they own. Record labels own the copyrights of the records, because they fund the production and studio time. This shouldn't be confused to the copyrights of the compositions and lyrics, which is a separate matter. Financial investments in the production and promotion of new projects are often big, and it takes long before the labels get any monetary return. Owning the master copyrights for recordings is crucial for the record labels long-term income, because it enables them to recoup their investments. (Rutter 2011, 119.)

According to Paul Rutter (2011, 120), author of the Music Industry Handbook, there are three core functions and divisions in a record label:

- **Products division:** A&R, Production, Marketing & Product Management, Sales & Distribution.
- **Promotion division:** Press, Promotion, Digital Operations, Creative/Video.
- **Administration:** Managing Director, Legal and Business Affairs, Business Development, Finance, Human Resources.

The label model continues to evolve, in order to be an integral part of the success formula. "Artists really benefit from having an infrastructure to support them, backed by human resource and expertise, that allows genuine creative freedom. Artists should be able to focus on their art. They shouldn't need to worry about organising their tour, trying to get media coverage in Germany, or running analytics on their streaming figures."

Stu Bergen, CEO, International and Global Commercial Services, Warner Music (IFPI Global Music Report 2019, 35.)

3.1 The most important aspects of A&R-work

The A&R departments main responsibility is to find new talent for the record label. The goal is to bring in successful acts to the label guaranteeing future revenues and copyright income. In pre- 1950's music industry, finding appropriate repertoire for the artists to perform was a crucial task for record labels. The phrase A&R originates from that era. The industry has changed, but finding great songs

is still a major factor in A&R work. The A&R team is also responsible for finding the best songwriters and producers to work with their artists, organizing studio sessions for them and often co-operating with the artists personal managers. (Rutter 2011, 120–121.) A&R is the nucleus of the record label. Without the right music, labels don't have a product to push, and other departments can't do their work. "I think it always starts with the music... and then from there we build on." (Rouzbehani 2019, according to Yglesias 2019.)

3.1.1 Discovering talent

One of the most important aspects of A&R-work is finding new artists and bringing them to the label. Especially nowadays, a successful signing is often a result of a signing contest, where an artist negotiates with many record labels to find the best one for them. (Kokko 2018.) One of the methods of finding potential artists is using different data sources to see what's trending online. Even when using data, it's always important to evaluate the acts live. Bruno Mars wasn't first signed because of data, but Post Malone was. (Hunter 2018.)

Especially in the United States using data sources has become very popular in the music business. In Finland, data isn't used as largely. Everywhere in the world A&R's put a lot of trust in their gut feeling and experience when scouting new talent. They also sign artists in the very beginning of their paths, when they see star potential. A&R's are constantly listening to new music, and when doing so, they are always searching for something they have never heard or seen before. (Hunter 2018.)



PICTURE 1. How Record Labels Amplify Talent in the Modern Music Marketplace (Miller 2019)

3.1.2 Songs & records

After the artist has been found, people want hits! One thing all of the A&R's mentioned as very important is the quality of the content, in this case the songs and records. Song meaning the composition and lyrics, and record meaning the ready-made track that has been recorded in a studio. In order to have a great record, you first need to have a great song. A good song can be turned into a good record, but not the other way around, says A&R Brett Bassock, who consults for Atlantic Records. "A great record pushes music forward. A great song is timeless". (Bassock 2018.)

Bassock thought that the dance music field had a lot of great records, but not that many great songs. He found some great songs and sent them to electronic DJ's to have them build the songs out. One of the songs he did that with was "In the Name of Love" by Martin Garrix & Bebe Rexha. Originally the song was a ballad. Bassock had producer Steve James go in with the original producer Matt Rad to work on the song. They talked a lot about different subcultures etc. and Steve James went in and produced that. Bassock sent the song to Martin Garrix, and today "In the Name of Love" is a massive hit with over 860 million streams on Spotify. (Bassock 2018.)



PICTURE 2. Cover art for In the Name of Love (Epic Amsterdam 2016)

Finnish A&R pioneer and CEO of Kaiku Entertainment Pekka Ruuska's method has always been putting the content first, focusing first and foremost on the lyrics. He thinks of A&R-work as an artform in itself. The A&R always brings their own artistic view on the table and often ends up gathering certain type of artists to work with. In his own company, he has found it very natural to especially sign songwriters. Ruuska wants to primarily serve the audience who finds the music's emotional experience through verbal or intellectual content. He thinks a great artist can offer their listeners interesting new worlds and brain-twisters, and has always enjoyed this kind of music himself, such as the music of Bob Dylan. From the artists he has himself worked with, for example Samuli Putro, Maija Vilkkumaa and one of his latest signings Juho Raja represent this type of artistry. (Ruuska 2019.)

3.1.3 Building relationships

When artists are signed, the A&R works to find core collaborators for them, usually songwriters and producers. Ian Hunter (2019), the Vice President of A&R at Atlantic Records, describes the process as something like "speed dating for artists". It's very helpful and important to find people who the artist likes and has good chemistry with. Who these people are, depends on the artist. For a dance artist for whom English isn't their first language you need a topliner to write melodies and lyrics, or a good record. For a rapper you need lots of beats and good producers. For a pop artist you may need a good lyric person. Hunter tells that for example songwriter Scott Harris was huge in the Sean Mendez project, as well as songwriter Emily Warren was for the Chainsmokers. (Hunter 2018.)

At the core of A&R-work is building a very good relationship with the artist in order to guide them through their career. One of the main jobs is to help the artist figure out who they are. "It's not understanding just the music, but the story behind it". (Bassock 2018.) You can easily get caught up in how much you like the music and lose sight of what the artist has going on around them, which is equally as important. (Bassock 2018.) A good team inside the record label is also crucial. It's important to keep a good work atmosphere and get the whole crew onboard, when creating success stories. A&R's work a lot in teams, and especially the team leaders need to have the time to listen to the issues of their colleagues and work them out together. (Kokko 2018.) Outside of the record label A&R's have contacts with artist managers, booking agencies, visual artists, photographers, press and other partners.



PICTURE 3. The connections of an A&R (Nevala 2019)

3.2 Work methods

An A&R's week at work consist of a lot of meetings. An A&R typically meets every week with the whole record label staff, the A&R-team, promotion & marketing, the digital team and of course the artists. A&R's listen to a lot of music every day to keep themselves updated and to find new songs. The ones who do it the most listen to even a thousand songs per day. (Hunter 2018.) The A&R's listen to new releases, artist demos and songs that are pitched to them.

Different A&R's have different focus points in their work. Brett Bassock describes that there are three types of A&R's: the Connectors, the Discoverers and the Record Makers. The Connectors are good at building relationships and finding the right teams. They know a lot of industry people and are working the scene actively. The Discoverers focus on finding new artists and music by seeing a lot of gigs, searching online and using data sources. The Record Makers are vision-

aries, who know how to make a hit record. Usually people start out as discoverers, learning to build relationships and becoming record makers after lots of experience. (Bassock 2018.) Especially in places like LA or London the discoverers are typically young people in their twenties, who go out on gigs about five times a week (Kangas 2018).



PICTURE 4. A&R types. (Bassock 2018, according to Nevala 2019)

Marja Kokko, Head of A&R at Universal Music Finland, tells that at the beginning of each year the A&R-team plans a publishing calendar for the whole artist roster as well as yearly goals. They want to make sure that all releases get the attention they deserve and nobody gets too exhausted at work. You don't want to end up in a situation where one marketing person suddenly has ten releases in their hands. At the fast-paced time of social media, when trends are coming and going faster than ever, timing has become crucial. It's the A&R's responsibility to recognize how much should be invested, also financially, and when. When the time is just right, you need to fire things up. At the end of the year the team evaluates how the year has went and have the goals been reached. (Kokko 2018.)

3.2.1 Managing the workload

An A&R's work is the kind where the to do-list never ends. "The A&R person is the most involved person in the project after the artist" (Hunter 2018). Especially in bigger markets like USA it's very common to mostly work all the time (Hunter 2018). It can be very dangerous if you end up constantly working and in order to deal with that, an A&R needs good prioritizing skills and an ability to handle stress (Ruuska 2019). Marja Kokko always tells young people coming in the industry to take care of their life outside work. People in music work with a lot of passion and the industry can really draw you in, but it shouldn't be your whole life. When you have that other side of your life as well, you can actually be better at your job. If you're too "in", it's difficult to stay objective. (Kokko 2018.) It's crucial to have time when you can completely switch off from music. For many A&R's it's a dear hobby like horse-riding, running, sailing or going to see ice-hockey games that gives them that break.

An A&R can contribute to their wellbeing by finding balance throughout the work-days. Routines are key! One good tip is to mute the phone, and just listen to song demos for a couple of hours. It's also a good idea to do remote work from home about once a week. (Kokko 2018.) With a good team you can divide or share the workload and have the opportunity to take stress-free vacations (Hunter 2018). Niko Kangas, former indie A&R and current Export Manager at Music Finland, thinks that the music industry glorifies itself, keeping itself outside the issues of wellbeing. Being an A&R is a very interesting line of work, but it can burn you out easily. Kangas thinks an A&R should aim to do normal length workdays, and if there are things you don't have time to do, you should ask yourself whether they really are beneficial to your work. Sleeping, eating and exercising are the basic things you should take care of. An A&R's job is brainwork, so the way your brain is functioning affects the job. (Kangas 2018.)

3.2.2 The changes and future of A&R work

"The absolute transformation of everything that we ever thought about music will take place within 10 years, and nothing is going to be able to stop it. I see absolutely no point in pretending that it's not going to happen. I'm fully confident that copyright, for instance, will no longer exist in 10 years, and authorship and intellectual property is in for such a bashing."

"Music itself is going to become like running water or electricity," he added. "So it's like, just take advantage of these last few years because none of this is ever going to happen again. You'd better be prepared for doing a lot of touring because that's really the only unique situation that's going to be left. It's terribly exciting. But on the other hand it doesn't matter if you think it's exciting or not; it's what's going to happen."

David Bowie in the New York Times, June 2002 (Pareles 2002)

Music business is in turmoil. The EDM-boom spread globally and rap has become the rock n' roll of today. The audience has more or less abandoned the physical album and turned towards streaming services, like Spotify. According to IFPI, the International Federation of the Phonograph Industry, 89% of music consumers listen to music through on-demand services. By the end of 2018, an estimated 255 million users paid for subscription accounts globally. People also spend more and more time listening to music, the average being 18 hours per week. (IFPI Music Listening Report 2019.) While people might have their headphones on all the time, audio books and podcasts have come to compete with music. But most A&R's see change as the status quo. Music business has transformed many times, and it will always continue to change. (Kangas 2018.)

The biggest change of the last decade for A&R's has been the shift of focus from albums to singles. For Marja Kokko, the definite beginning of this era was back in 2014 when her artist Kasmir released his first solo single "Vadelmavene" and it became a huge Spotify hit. She says that if you exaggerate a bit, you could say that nowadays you need to put the same amount of work into one single, as you used to put to an entire album. (Kokko 2018.) Pekka Ruuska has often seen hits born in an unbind situation where the artist writes lots of songs to an entity. In the end, some of the songs have become catchier than the others. He thinks that

the pressure of only writing hit singles may result in a situation that actually creates less hits than before. Nowadays, the pressure for making hits cannot be hidden. At the same time everyone knows, that there can be only so many big records in a year. Especially in smaller market areas like Finland, one huge hit can block the chances of other songs becoming hits for a long while. (Ruuska 2019.)

Even with all these shifts, the core of the A&R work hasn't changed. When the "old world" started collapsing 15-20 years ago with cd-piratism, Napster and so on, there was a legit worry if the music business will survive or not. At the time, Ruuska decided that he won't try to solve these issues, and that he will just continue working on good music, just as before. People will want to hear stories and music, because it's as important to human kind as eating. Whatever shake-ups come our way, music will always be a part humanity and what people consider as good life, and there will always be some sort of business model around it. Ruuska says that following these guidelines was not only a successful way of working through that critical period, but also a way of keeping oneself sane in this industry. The business has always been about finding great artists and songs and presenting them to the audience. The key is the experience of being touched by music and what happens in that moment. (Ruuska 2019.)

3.3 The artists

The A&R team's goal is to make sure their artists have all the tools and support they need to succeed. A&R's help artists to develop their sound, find the right creative teams and stand out in today's oversaturated market. "Just because it's *easier* to hear and share music with the world in 2019, that doesn't mean it's become simpler to write a great song or keep people's attention." (Yglesias 2019.) The belief in the artists needs to extend beyond the A&R department, first inside the label and then in the audience (Rutter 2011, 120). When the artist has already released several albums, the key question is how to stay relevant. In order to continue succeeding, the label needs to figure out ways of keeping their artists audiences interested. (Yglesias 2019.)

3.3.1 Working with the artists

Working with the artists starts by finding and signing them. "There are a lot of great singers, but not a lot of great artists", says A&R Brett Bassock (2018). When you find something interesting, you need to evaluate if what you have found is a good song or a career artist. What is most important is that the artist is hungry and willing to work, which becomes more important than the talent in the end. (Hunter 2018.) "Number one is talent; number two is that they have the integrity and the drive to see those days that are tough through; number three is somebody that I want to speak to every single day." (Vinten 2019, according to Jones 2019). The artists image is a factor too, and someone seemingly boring may show up later with green hair, creating their signature look. Finding the artist can be so many things from bumping into something interesting online to even talking someone out of jail. (Hunter 2018.)



PICTURE 5. Signature hairstyle by Halsey (Van Der Watt 2015)

PICTURE 6. Signature hairstyle by Alma (Kipahti 2016)

After the collaboration has started, the A&R's listen to song demos together with the artists and producers, give feedback, set goals and make next step plans

together. The number of artists an A&R works with varies. In the United States it is usually between 5-10, but in Finland the number can be even 15-20. This also depends of whether you are the only A&R working on the project or not. Ian Hunter tells that if he'd be the only person working on the band Why Don't We, he'd be only working on Why Don't We. The band might have six weeks of song-writing sessions in ten different rooms, so it would be impossible to do anything else, if you would be on your own. But nowadays it's very common to do lots of co-A&R projects. The projects also vary in genres, which makes the work even more interesting. (Hunter 2018.)

If an A&R has too many projects to work on, he will probably end up having problems with communicating with the artists. If the A&R does not keep in touch with the artists enough, they feel offended. On the other hand, if you try to maintain the service level up to standard, you may burn out. (Ruuska 2019.) It is very professional to understand the limits of one's resources and delegate projects to other A&R's when necessary. Co-working and teamwork is a strength, but it's also pursuable with every artist to find one A&R who is primarily in charge of the project. (Kokko 2018.)

Both the American and Finnish A&R's interviewed stated that it's important to work with artists in different stages of their career. "Some are bigger than others, some are developing, some have time to figure themselves out", says Hunter (2018). Pekka Ruuska has seen a shift in this too, and thinks that the stages aren't exactly like they used to be. Before, about 1/3 of his artists were in the hot stage, 1/3 were in the developing stage and 1/3 were in the aftermath stage following an album release etc. Nowadays, more than before, the artists are on alert all the time. (Ruuska 2019.)

Expectations management is key when planning the steps and milestones of an artist. This starts by locating the artist on the artist field. Many record labels have different categories for their artists. It would be easy to get points from the artist by telling the best possible scenario, but an A&R's duty is to set realistic goals. (Kokko 2018.) Setting the bar too high is a mistake, which leads to the artist getting disappointed and feeling like things didn't go as planned. When you have realistic expectations and you know the case well, you have a good chance of

exceeding expectations. An A&R should always be honest in order to keep the collaboration trustable. (Kangas 2018.)

An A&R's job is to understand the market, the fresh sounds and what's cutting edge (Hunter 2018). Occasionally A&R's work on projects where they recognize it's a hit. But A&R's don't want commercial success to be too much of an incentive for any artist. The music needs to have some other basis in order to thrive. It's important for the artist also to understand the commercial context, but it's dangerous if you start making music for Spotify or radio, or get too caught up evaluating your music through its success. Sometimes it's the best choice to do something marginal, to be able to do something else next. The most important thing for the artists is to boldly be themselves. (Kokko 2018.)

3.3.2 Making your artist a priority inside your label

When it's time to get an artist's career going, the A&R needs to get the whole team onboard. Pushing things forward alone is almost impossible, and it's not something an A&R wants to do. It's essential to keep the whole label informed about where the projects are at. (Kokko 2018.) An A&R needs to get their label genuinely excited and behind the project, including the promotion team, sales team and other record label employees. You want your whole community to be an advocate for your artist! "It's all about getting people to love the music. If they love the music, it's not that hard. If they love the artist, it's not that hard" (Hunter 2018). The whole music business is about creating something people care about. The American indie/electro pop artist Melanie Martinez is a good example of a brand people buy into, because she's making everything creatively. (Hunter 2018.) With her latest album K-12, the 24-year-old artist also wrote and directed a 90-minute movie to accompany the album, featuring her debut album's titular character "Cry Baby" (Atlantic Records 2019).



PICTURE 7. Melanie Martinez (Atlantic Records)

4. BECOMING AN A&R

4.1 Many ways of becoming an A&R

There is no one way of becoming an A&R. A&R's come from various backgrounds, such as working as musicians, artists, producers or in media. In the United States, an A&R position is typically landed after working in management, production, marketing, promotion or radio. (Berklee College of Music 2019.) It can also be a benefit to be a regular John Doe, who can relate to the audience (Kangas 2018). What all A&R's share is a passion for music. Here are five true stories of entering the music business and becoming an A&R. Later in section four, there will be an introduction on all five interviewees.

4.1.1 Ian Hunter's story

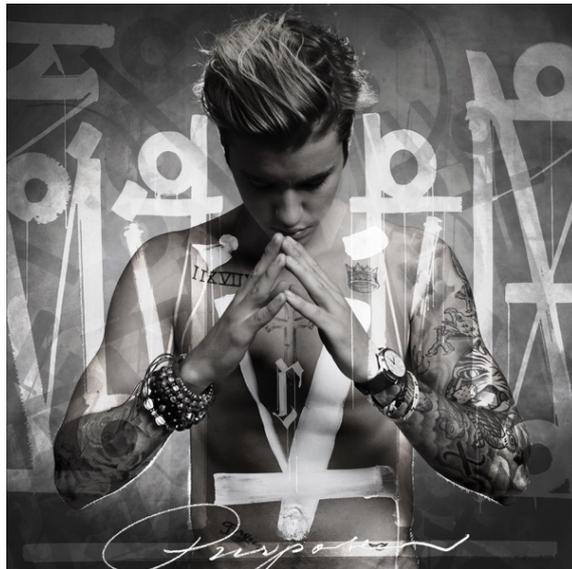
Ian Hunter took his first steps in the music business by running a Hype Machine blog. He was majoring in economics at Union College and didn't really even know what an A&R was. His love of music led him to write his thesis about data in music. After doing internships in banking, he decided that it wasn't for him, and that he's going to take any job in the music business. Hunter's first job in the music industry was at Warner Music Group's Research and Analysis team, doing physical cd sales analysis. While working there, he kept getting EDM and dance promos sent to him by for example Liz Miller, the Head of Big Beat Records at the time, with the wish of Hunter posting the songs on his blog. Hunter was happy to respond he worked in the same building! He met up with them, playing them a bunch of unreleased songs, and stuff he was really into, and got asked to consult for them. (Hunter 2018.)

While keeping his day job, Hunter started A&R consulting for Big Beat, which was the beginning of the highly unusual shift he made from the distribution side to the A&R side. He then met Craig Kallman, the CEO of Atlantic Records. Kallman was impressed to meet someone who was a data person and an A&R guy and he told Hunter they had a job for him in California. Currently Atlantic is very data heavy and Ian Hunter is Atlantic's Vice President of A&R. (Hunter 2018.)

4.1.2 Brett Bassock's story

Brett Bassock started out by booking a Battle of Bands to his home town in Connecticut at the age of fifteen. He found interesting bands online and figured out, that if he can find artists he likes before they get big yet, he can book them for cheaper. When they got bigger before the actual show, the profit of the shows is much better. These were actually his first steps towards a&r, discovering artists and developing his taste. Bassock says he learned a lot during those years about how to find artists and how to build relationships with them, their managers and their teams. (Bassock 2018.)

Later Bassock studied in Indiana University majoring in rhetoric and communications, working full time on music during school breaks. The school didn't have anything to do with music, but helped with public speaking and communicating. Bassock interned in New York for a booking agency and then Atlantic Records. He got to know Jeff Levin, an A&R at Atlantic Records, and when Levin was moved to Los Angeles, Bassock also moved there for the summer, helping songwriters and producers to write the best songs possible. Still in school, he started scouting for Atlantic, doing a lot of research and developing a good ear. It was trial and error for years, and every step of the way he learned a little bit more. A defining moment in Bassock's career was when he put Eben Wares and Steve James in the studio together and they wrote Purpose, which became a massive hit and an album title track for Justin Bieber. Today, Brett Bassock has his own company Renegade Publishing, while he continues to work as an A&R consult for Atlantic Records. (Bassock 2018.)



PICTURE 8. Cover art for Justin Bieber's album Purpose (Lewis 2015)

4.1.3 Niko Kangas' story

Niko Kangas has a long history with music as a musician. He played the saxophone and sang in a renowned soul-, rock-, punk-band Damn Seagulls, founded in 1997. The band released four studio albums with Fullsteam Records, the latest one called "Let It Shine" in 2014. (Kenttämää, 2017.) While Kangas was studying cultural management in Humak University of Applied Sciences, he did an internship at his bands indie label, Fullsteam Records in Helsinki. At the time Fullsteam didn't have a named A&R, and pretty soon that started to interest Kangas. He decided to drop out of school and stay working at Fullsteam, which he said was the best decision ever. (Kangas 2018.)



PICTURE 9. Damn Seagulls (Lindfors 2014)

Eventually he became the Head of A&R at Fullsteam Records, working also as a manager for Fullsteam Management. His career as a musician gave him a lot of credibility and experience to work in the indie rock field, with bands similar to his own. Currently Niko Kangas works as Pop, Rock and Jazz Export Manager at organization Music Finland. (Kangas 2018.)

4.1.4 Marja Kokko's story

Writing and music have been Marja Kokko's passions since childhood, which she spent playing classical piano. Studying at Tampere University, she majored in journalism. Kokko worked for many years in media: the press, tv and radio. When she was working for tv show Idols, she became acquainted with the term A&R. Later, when working for Radio Nova, she had an idea of bringing bands to perform live on the radio. The first band to do it was a Finnish duo phenomenon PMMP, who performed four songs on the radio show. This format became known as Nova Stage and is still running today. (Kokko 2018.)

Riku Mattila, Head of A&R at Universal Music Finland at the time, got interested of the Nova Stage concept and wanted to meet up with Kokko. After a few meetings, Mattila asked if she would be interested of an A&R position at Universal. Marja Kokko then became the first female A&R in Finland. Kokko tells that her background in media has helped her tremendously in her current position as

Head of A&R. Understanding the media field is very helpful, because artists also have to operate in that environment. (Kokko 2018.)

4.1.5 Pekka Ruuska's story

Pekka Ruuska became an A&R by walking a musician's path. Since he was a child, he dreamed of becoming a musician and an artist. He wrote gospel music and performed lots of shows. He says the different kind of concert situation prepped him for A&R-work, for example having to figure out how to hold a concert together in the worst possible settings. He studied to be a teacher and worked at an elementary school, continuing songwriting. Back in 1990 when Ruuska was in his thirties, he released his breakout single "Rafaelin enkeli". That became a turning point for him and he left his job as a teacher to focus completely on his career in music. (Ruuska 2019.)

While he was still a popular artist he was asked by Fazer, nowadays Warner Music Finland, if he would come and work as their Production Manager. He agreed, and worked in the position for 13 years. In 2007 he founded his own company Kaiku Entertainment. Ruuska tells that all life experiences contribute to being a good A&R. He thinks that studying education and working as a teacher taught him goal oriented thinking and working with young people, who many artists are. His time at church gave him inspiration ideologically, and he believes that being ideological in some way is very beneficial to songwriting. The shift some people make from artists to A&R's he describes as being the same thing as in hockey - some of the players end up becoming coaches. (Ruuska 2019.)

4.2 Qualities and characteristics

To state the obvious, an A&R needs to have a profound love for music. The work also requires an understanding of the genres you work with and the will to actively seek out new music. (Kangas 2018.) On top of the passion for music, an A&R needs to be curious of the world around them. Music is always born in relation to the spirit of the time, so an A&R should be very interested in society and what's

happening in the world, and be able to adjust to it. (Ruuska 2019.) In addition to their great ears, A&R's rely on a finely tuned and constantly evolving understanding of music tastes and trends (Berklee College of Music 2019). When you have a long career, one of the biggest challenges is to keep up with the zeitgeist. One can't be too puristic about music or live in the past. If you aren't able to keep up with the cultural climate, it's "game over". (Ruuska 2019.)

A good A&R makes an artist shine and can channel their music to the audience, helping the audience to find something interesting in the artist. An A&R's job is to have people understand an artist and work towards that in situations where they don't. (Kokko 2019.) The hunger to realize untapped potential and give new artists an opportunity to be heard is important for the success of an A&R (Berklee College of Music 2019). You have to be creative and brave enough to go in a direction together with the artists that doesn't exist yet and cannot be compared to anything that is already out there (Kokko 2018). This especially is the case with artists that don't fit into genre boxes. But when great music comes out, people will support it. A&R's have seen it happen over and over again. (Sealy 2019, according to Yglesias 2019.)

One of the recent examples of this is the success story of indie pop sensation Billie Eilish (Ruuska 2019). The 17-year old phenomenon creates her music together with her brother Finneas O'Connell, who also produces the tracks. Her out-of-the-box debut album "WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?" debuted at 1# in the Billboard 200 Chart in the United States, and her quirky hit "Bad Guy" has over 900 million hits on Spotify (2019). On the day of the release, more than 81% of the LP's duration was played through by its listeners on Apple Music. In today's single-focused streaming era, this kind of success for an album is exceptional. The album was released as a joint venture by Darkroom and Interscope Records. (Stassen, 2019.)



PICTURE 10. Billie Eilish - WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO? (Billie Eilish Official Website 2019)

An A&R works as the bridge between the artist and the commercial world (Kokko 2018). "You have to be able to understand the market, because what people think is good is all relative" (Hunter 2018). Understanding the markets gives A&R's the ability to find things that can thrive in a commercial environment and work for a certain audience. They should be market savvy to be able to find ways to market a specific type of music to a specific group of people. With this insight, they can help an artist to thrive. (Kangas 2018.)

One of the A&R's best tools is compassion. An A&R should have good social and teamworking skills in order to make people around them flourish. It's an absolute strength if you are good with people, trustworthy, a good listener and can read non-verbal messages. In relation to the artists, being an A&R is a service occupation. The collaboration bases on trust, respect and appreciation, which is the underline behind every tough decision. (Kokko 2018.) You also have to be "cool with the artists". An A&R can't be too introverted, since they have to be able to talk with people, be social and close deals (Hunter 2018). You have to understand the nature of creative work and be able to lead creative projects (Kangas 2018).

An artist's career in music is bound to include disappointments and tight spots, and an A&R should have a personal history with the subject. It helps if you have

had the experience of for example performing in a hall for 500 with only 30 people in the audience. Or if you have had huge success and seen the issues that come with it. Giving difficult or negative feedback is one of the biggest challenges of A&R-work and some are better at it than others. In those moments, you have to face not being liked and make peace with that feeling. (Ruuska 2019.)

Pekka Ruuska thinks that the artists should also accept the possibility that what they create might not always be excellent. He prefers the "no-bullshit" kind of communication, but has seen it rub people the wrong way. It is very difficult for people to receive a message they wouldn't want to hear. Ruuska admits that he has made mistakes in evaluating what people can handle. Talking about songs is very delicate, and even though you don't have any intention to criticize the artist themselves, they tend to take feedback very personally. Ruuska says this has been one of the biggest lessons he has learned in his career. (Ruuska 2019.)

Some of the features A&R's need are more of natural talents, and are hard to acquire. But when A&R's are asked, what studies they could benefit from, psychology comes up in most answers. A crash course to handling challenging situations is also mentioned and leadership skills are something one could always develop. (Kokko 2018.) There already are people working in the music business, who have done studies in psychology and feel that it's beneficial. Being able to work well with people is very important, and psychological studies could benefit any A&R. (Kangas 2018.)

All backgrounds and experiences can be an asset to an A&R. This being said, most A&R's are men. In this study, one out of five A&R's interviewed was a woman. Though it's only 20%, it is still way more than the percentage of women working in A&R positions in Finland. This is an issue also globally. Ashley Calhoun (2019, according to Yglesias 2019), Vice President of A&R at Pulse Media in Los Angeles, thinks that women should open doors to other women in the industry.

We just really have to have each other's backs because if we don't, we can't expect men or someone else to. Even though there's a lot of great men that really support this vision, we have to just be proactive.

Ashley Calhoun, Vice President of A&R, Pulse Media (according to Yglesias 2019.)

In 2018, the New York Times wrote about a study led by Dr. Smith which analyzed the top 600 songs in the USA from 2012 to 2017. The study found that 22.4 percent of the performing artists were women, and out of the 2,767 songwriters credited on those songs, 12.3 percent were women. Female producers were even rarer, at just 2% in a subset of 300 songs. (Sisario 2018.) Latoya Lee, VP of Creative Services at Atlas Music Publishing wants to see more black women in positions to make decisions. Persons of color, especially women, are underrepresented in the A&R field. There's already a lot of women working in marketing, promotion and radio, but not in A&R. (Lee 2019, according to Yglesias 2019.) "That's going to be the defining moment in my career, being able to say that I molded the next generation of young women music executives, but also young black women executives" (Lee 2019, according to Yglesias 2019).

5. ANALYZES AND RESULTS

The interviewees started their journeys as A&R's from very different perspectives. Brett Bassock (2019) came to the music field through organizing gigs, Pekka Ruuska (2019) from an artist's point of view and Niko Kangas (2019) as a rock musician. Marja Kokko (2019) came to the music industry as a media professional and Ian Hunter (2019) as a data person. None of them had initially aimed for becoming A&R's in particular, but they ended up in A&R positions through their drive, musical knowledge, vision and special skills. All of the interviewees believed that all kinds of studies can benefit an A&R's work, but didn't see it as a highly important factor. Kokko, Kangas and Ruuska (2019) named studying psychology as something all A&R's could benefit from. Though successful A&R's come from very varying backgrounds, there isn't as much diversity when it comes to gender. Women are currently a small minority in the A&R world.

In this study, I found that the main abilities and characteristics of an A&R are:

- Love of music
- Curiosity and creativity
- Ability to see and realize potential
- Social and psychological skills

From the record labels perspective, the main job of an A&R's is to bring in hits and hit artists. But what is most important for the A&R themselves, depends on the A&R. What's important to Ian Hunter is that he's not only able to bring in hit songs and artists, but can prove that he can successfully do it over and over again. (Hunter 2019.) Brett Bassock is most focused on excellent record-making and Niko Kangas sees the quality of the content and good relationships with the artist as the most important aspects (Bassock 2019, Kangas 2019). Pekka Ruuska has always put the songs first, especially the lyrics (Ruuska 2019). Signing new artists is first on Marja Kokko's priority list, as she considers it to be the foundation and starting point of all A&R work (Kokko 2019).

The A&R's main line of work is to find and sign new artists, and work together with them towards making their career successful. Katie Vinten, co-founder of Facet Records and Facet Publishing and A&R consult for Warner Records describes the work in a nutshell: "My main purpose is to get every ounce of potential out of someone's ability and help them see it for themselves – and then help other

people see it. Then everything else falls into place" (Vinten 2019, according to Jones 2019).

All of the interviewees described the normal workday of an A&R the same way. It includes a lot of meetings with colleagues, artists, songwriters and producers and other partners such as artist managers. A&R's also see live gigs and visit studio sessions. All of them agreed that working as an A&R can be very stressful. Especially in the United States working around the clock is pretty normal, but Ian Hunter (2019) told that having a good team around you helps a lot. Marja Kokko (2019) and Pekka Ruuska (2019) both have important hobbies that give them the opportunity to switch off. Niko Kangas (2019) thinks that A&R's should take good care of their well-being in order to keep their brains functioning well, because A&R work is mainly brainwork.

The number of artists the A&R's work with varied between 8 and 15. Making the artist a priority inside your label is something all A&R's consider very important. The best way to do that, is to keep people updated about what's happening (Kokko 2019). Hunter (2019) reminded that when you work with good music, it's not that hard to get people involved. All of them stated that they want to work in situations where there's a whole team behind the artist and their release.

Though the core of A&R work is the same everywhere, there are also differences between Finland and United States, the two countries where the interviewees are from. One of the biggest differences is in the use of data. In the United States, using internet data as a tool for A&R work has become very common (Hunter 2019), but none of the Finnish interviewees mentioned it. The American A&R's work with less artists than in Finland, but they listen to more songs, even hundreds per day (Bassock 2019, Hunter 2019). In Finland, the music business isn't as highly competitive and stressful as in bigger market areas, and the Nordic way of working allows you to have free-time as well (Kangas 2019).

6. DISCUSSION

We live in a time where an individual with a spark for songwriting can easily make music, even from the comfort of their own home, and upload their music to world-wide streaming services. Music distribution isn't exclusive anymore. Even so, the need for music professionals like A&R's hasn't decreased. While making music has become more accessible for everyone, making hits isn't easier than before. There is so much music out there, that it's hard to stand out from the crowd. Professional artists need more skills than ever. The pace of releasing music is very high, every single aims to be a hit and you have to be present and available for your fans all over social media to keep their interest.

With all this pressure, artists need people by their side who understand the current media context and musical trends. A&R's can offer their artists guidance, a truthful mirror and realistic but revolutionary visions. They reassure the artists when needed and bring a sense of security in the creative work. One of the most important tasks for an A&R is to first help create situations where great songs can be born and then help them turn in to greatest possible recordings. The next hard part is to decide which songs to release, and when. If you understand the musical and socio-cultural climate, you can anticipate musical trends. If you know the trends and keep yourself up to date, you can master timing. When you combine the right kind of music with the right timing, you have momentum. And I believe the momentum is a big factor in creating success for artists.

The music industry has a long way to go towards becoming inclusive and having more women and minority groups represented in positions of power. It would be very interesting to do further research on women in influential positions in the music field. I believe that there's a lot of women working in the music industry who have the abilities that could make a great A&R. The question is, how the music industry perceives their strengths. The world of music business could actually adopt a lot from the A&R's way of thinking, in order to see and realize this unused potential. The industry is once again at a crossroads concerning music consumption and the overall business models in music. It would be an opportune

time to break free from old patterns in all areas, be open-minded and unleash all the potential that hasn't been recognized before.

What is never changing in the field of music is that people want to hear it. Humans need music in order to get in touch with their feelings, sometimes alone and sometimes together with thousands of people. The experience is private but universal. What makes me happy is that whatever the trends are, people seem to truly recognize authenticity and gravitate towards it. True artists who have the ability to express big feelings through their music end up being the most successful. Because of this, the music industry can be hopeful and maintain a feeling of standing on solid ground.

I presume that A&R's aren't known in public, because they tend to be people who have chosen not to be in the limelight. Their profession is also complex and not easily describable or understandable for the public. The audience is only interested in the artists, and that seems to suit A&R's very well. The music industry itself seems to have a twofold take on A&R's. On the other hand, they are amongst the most influential people in the industry and highly known and valued. But on the other hand, they still partly lack public acknowledgement. Ian Hunter brought to my attention, that for the Grammys Association, an A&R credit on an album doesn't mean as much as if you wrote the liner notes. A&R's can't be voting members in the Grammys Association. This issue has been recognized recently, and will probably be fixed in the future. (Hunter 2018). But it still reveals something about the perplexity around this profession. Some have asked already long ago, if the era of A&R's is coming to an end? (Lindvall 2011). I beg to differ, because record labels aren't going anywhere and artists can, maybe more than ever, benefit greatly from the support and expertise of an excellent A&R.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview form

1. How did you become an A&R? What were the most important steps?
2. Was it something you aimed for or did it happen “by accident”?
3. What have you studied and has it helped in your career as an A&R?
4. What are the features that you think make a great A&R?
5. What do you feel are the most important aspects of your work?
6. Is there something you would like to learn more of, that could benefit your work or career?
7. Do you have a “normal workday” and what does it look like?
8. Do you have any methods for handling the stress/amount of work?
9. How many artists do you work with? Do you think it’s a good amount?
10. What are the ways to make your artist a priority inside your label?