

Obsessed With Music

An Interview with Pete Ganbarg, President, Pure Tone Music

EDITORS' NOTE Pete Ganbarg is a two-time Grammy Award winning record producer, Artists & Repertoire (A&R) executive and music publisher who has been doing major label A&R for the past 35 years and is currently the President of Pure Tone Music (puretone.com). Most recently president of A&R for Atlantic Records from 2008-2024, Ganbarg currently operates two music publishing companies, Songs With A Pure Tone and Margetts Road Music. Some of the artists that Ganbarg has worked with in his career include Santana (the nine-time Grammy winning album *Supernatural*), Lin-Manuel Miranda (the Diamond certified *Hamilton* cast album), as well as contemporary stars (*Twenty One Pilots*, *Christina Perri*, *Melanie Martinez*), all time classic artists (*Chaka Khan*, *Donna Summer*, *America*) and hit Broadway cast recordings and film soundtracks (*Dear Evan Hansen*, *Mean Girls*, *The Greatest Showman*). Some of the songs published by Ganbarg's companies include Miley Cyrus' Grammy award winning *Record of the Year*, *Flowers*, and Alex Warren's global #1 hit "Ordinary," as well as hits by Benson Boone, Charli XCX, Beyoncé, Lizzo, Justin Bieber, Maroon 5, Katy Perry, Lewis Capaldi, Ed Sheeran, and more. Ganbarg also hosts a popular podcast about the history of contemporary music called *Rock & Roll High School* and serves as a board member of the *Songwriters Hall of Fame*.



Pete Ganbarg

me to do A&R which is the division of a record company which signs artists and oversees all creative aspects of the record making process. I've now done that for over 35 years, most recently as president of A&R for Atlantic Records from 2008-2024.

How do you define Pure Tone Music's mission?

Pure Tone wants to work with creative people who understand what the audience wants, even before they sometimes realize it themselves. We are a record company, an A&R consulting firm and a music publisher. We work with artists, labels and songwriters. Our songwriters have written the biggest pop songs for two of the past three years – "Flowers" by Miley Cyrus and "Ordinary" by Alex Warren. We want to continue to grow our roster of best-in-class artists, clients, and songwriters.

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Will you provide an overview of Pure Tone's services and capabilities?

Pure Tone is a full-service music company focused on label work, A&R-for-hire work, music publishing, and education. I teach full-semester college courses on the history of A&R and the contemporary music business, and not only do I find that stimulating and satisfying, but it gives me a pipeline to future creatives that I can hire and mentor.

How critical has it been to build the Pure Tone team?

Whenever I find someone special, I try to bring them in either as an employee, consultant, intern, etc. The more great young people we can have in our system, the more optimistic I get about what Pure Tone can do in the future.

How do you approach your management style?

I see myself as a music junkie and an educator, so my management style is a cross between those two things. To be an A&R person, you need to live music 24/7 or, as they used to say, "have shellac in your veins." Those people are out there and those are the people I want to mentor, guide and spar with. Sometimes my favorite thing to hear from a new employee is "Sorry Pete, you're wrong." I love that.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in the music industry?

You have to be able to live, breathe, and eat music. Showing up is 50 percent of success. If the call comes at 2:00 AM and you're in your pajamas, you need to make a decision: do I stay in bed or do I get up, go out, and seize the opportunity. If you don't, someone else will. And having an understanding of the history of why good songs became hit songs is crucial to understanding the future of the business. It's something I teach a lot about in my college classes.

When you look to the future of the industry, what excites you the most, and what concerns you the most?

Things like technology, whether it's AI or whatever comes after, don't scare me. I think it's very exciting to have more creative tools in the toolbox. It's very similar to sampling and interpolation. As long as the original content creators are compensated for their work, it's a very healthy creative building block. I'm more concerned about the glut of private equity money coming into the music business. It fosters the opposite environment to the one that created the most patient, forward-thinking, innovative pioneers in recorded music history – people like Ahmet Ertegun, Jac Holzman, Chris Blackwell and Seymour Stein. They would never have achieved what they achieved with the impatient stopwatch of private equity. ●

Will you discuss your career journey?

I've always been obsessed with music, from a very early age. As soon as I could work, I started as a mobile DJ, performing at weekly parties. I would take whatever I earned and spend it on new records that I would test out at the following week's parties. If people liked a song, they would dance. If they didn't, they would leave the room. That taught me an important lesson in understanding why people like what they like and vice versa. I looked for a college with a good radio station because I thought I would pursue DJing. In college, I ended up running the radio station, booking the campus concerts, and managing local bands. I also met a fellow student whose best friend's father was in the music business. He became my first boss a year after I graduated. At that point, he had started a record label and hired