

Walker's World

CMA Board member Jeff Walker is a man who wears many hats. He is the President of AristoMedia, a successful Music Row marketing/public relations company; served as the producer of the CMA Music Festival Greased Lightning Daytime Stages at Riverfront Park for the past three years; and he spearheads many of CMA's expanding global initiatives.

In 2000, CMA restructured its international operations to have a more centralized approach to the global market. Rather than maintain offices in the UK, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands, the Board chose to direct international efforts from Nashville. CMA Executive Director Ed Benson and Associate Executive Director Tammy Genovese asked Walker to chair the Global Markets Task Force.

The Task Force has spearheaded many global initiatives with the assistance of industry volunteers from around the world.

The first step the Task Force took was to create advisory groups representing different countries and regions. The UK, chaired by CMA Director of International Bobbi Boyce; Australia, chaired by Board member Rob Potts; Canada, the most recent addition, chaired by Board member Bruce Allen; and Walker chairs the U.S. advisory group, which is separate from the Task Force.

The advisory groups, comprised of top industry executives, meet quarterly and provide information and direction for the Task Force in their relevant territories. "These groups have been invaluable in providing us guidance in making the right decisions in specific territories," Walker said.

The Task Force has been instrumental in accomplishing the three CMA strategic initiatives from a global perspective:

1. *Make the CMA Music Festival a world-class event.*

The Task Force and UK advisory group have worked with the UK-based Tennessee Tourism Lofthouse Partnership to help educate the British media and public about the four-day event each June. Other international music festivals have been targeted for advertising and flyer distribution and media campaigns have been expanded to embrace foreign journalists and television crews.

International attendance at the 2005 CMA Music Festival increased 27 percent more than the previous year.

2. *Maximize the potential of the CMA Awards.*

With a desire to expand the international viewership of the CMA Awards broadcast, the Task Force facilitated an agreement with Alfred Haber & Associates, one of the top international syndication companies. In 2004, the Awards' international penetration increased 40 percent.

3. *Build stronger relationships with our artists.*

The Task Force spearheaded several initiatives in an effort to improve artist relations.

The Global Country Artist Award, which is presented to an artist who has made significant contributions to the advancement of Country Music in their territory outside of the U.S., was enacted in 2003. This year's Award was presented to Canada's Paul Brandt. Prior winners include Kasey Chambers, Slim Dusty and Lee Kernagan, all from Australia.

New from Nashville (NUNV) brought the varied sounds of Country Music to London and Scotland in January. Jessi Alexander, Jamie O'Neal and Jon Randall performed. The second event is planned for January 2006 and may be expanded to include another date in Ireland.

The Global Markets Forum is held every year around the CMA Awards and features a keynote speaker and performances for international journalists and visitors by U.S.-based artists.

The Global Artists Party, which showcases artists from territories all over the world, was established as the unofficial kick off to the CMA Music Festival. Held at The Stage on Broadway, performances in 2005 included Adam Gregory (Canada), Mike Carr (Australia), "Search For A New Country Star" winner Justin McGurk (Ireland), Telstra's "Road to Tamworth" winner Aleyce Simmonds (Australia), Charlie Nagatani (Japan), Bobby Cash (India) and Rachel Warwick (United Kingdom).

As part of the partnership with CMA, Simmonds and McGurk performed on the Greased Lightning Daytime Stages during the Wide World of Country Show on Sunday, June 12.

Walker gives most of the credit for international success to the CMA staff, the Task Force and advisory group members. "We don't directly coordinate tours, publicity, bookings or media campaigns," Walker said. "We provide an infrastructure to facilitate those things. It's gratifying when a plan comes together as well as this one has. It has been great teamwork."

Growth of international membership in CMA is a key initiative for the Task Force. In the past year, the organization has seen 17 percent growth in international membership. "E-mail and the Internet have enabled us to be more involved with our global members," Walker said. "We have been able to involve them in the nomination process for our international achievement awards and this has resulted in a more balanced structure for the recipients and feeling of inclusiveness for the international members."

Walker's drive and determination have given him the reputation for being one of the busiest men in Nashville. A native of Sydney, Australia, Walker arrived in Nashville in the 1970s. Since that time he has done almost everything in the business except front a band (although in his early long hair days, with the encouragement of four or five tequila shots, he won a talent contest singing "Age of Aquarius.")

He came to Nashville to visit his father, noted arranger-conductor Bill Walker, who is best known for his credits as music director of "The Johnny Cash Show" on ABC-TV (1969-72), the CMA Awards (1975-89) and "The Statler Brothers Show" on The Nashville Network (1991-98). It did not take him long to make Music City his permanent home.

Following a brief stint with the accounting firm of Price Waterhouse, Walker joined independent label Con Brio Records where he ran the day-to-day operations from 1976-79. He eventually became Vice President. During that time, he co-wrote two Top 20 songs with Don King ("The Feeling's So Right Tonight" and She's The Girl of My Dreams") and he married artist Terri Hollowell, who was enjoying solid chard success on the label. "I gave her a long term contract," Walker joked.

In 1980, Walker formed AristoMedia which now boasts a staff of 16 and focuses on many areas of publicity and media relations, secondary radio marketing and video and dance club promotion. "It has been very fulfilling to see the company continue to grow

with the industry over the past 25 years,” he said. “Many opportunities for expansion are still out there.”

Walker attributed his interest in global markets to many factors: his travels as a young man, interaction with people from other countries and his interest in music from artists all over the world.

Boyce is an enthusiastic supporter of Walker’s global vision. “Jeff’s drive, passion and endless support for international talent is amazing,” she said. “His voice is heard about all others. His drive and determination have kept the international market in the sights of the entire industry.”

Walker is more philosophic about his contributions to the global marketplace for Country Music. “Music is universal. It has no borders. As an organization, the CMA’s role is to provide the tools that will open more doors. Country Music belongs in people’s homes all over the world. It appeals to human emotions on many levels. Well-constructed lyrics and memorable melodies create songs that people can accept. It is great to be a small cog in the wheel of Country Music’s global outreach.”

j. poet

On the Web: aristomedia.com