

PRESCRIPTION

R E N E W E D



The women of **Prescription Songs** have taken Dr. Luke's publishing company into a new era — and are finding innovative ways to fight for songwriters

BY NOLAN FEENEY
PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIANA KING

From left: Katie Mitzell Fagan photographed April 7 in Nashville. Rhea Pasricha and Sara Walker photographed April 11 in Los Angeles.

EMILY WARREN WAS FREAKING out. Back in 2012, the now Grammy Award-nominated songwriter was a student at New York University trying to get ahead in the music industry when a management deal fell apart. "I was distraught that I

was missing my chance and was never going to have an opportunity," she says. Scouring her inbox for promising contacts, she found an email from an Atlantic Records A&R assistant named Rhea Pasricha, who had once come to see Warren's high school band perform and exchanged a few messages with her.

Desperate to reconnect, Warren sent her a few songs she had been working on. It was fortuitous timing: Pasricha was about to start a new job at Prescription Songs, the independent publishing company launched in 2009 by songwriter-producer Lukasz "Dr. Luke" Gottwald. They talked by phone and discussed demos for a few months before Pasricha invited Warren out to Los Angeles to have dinner and join a few songwriting sessions. "At the time, I started talking to a few other publishers, and there was no question about who was going to be a homie, who was going to go fight for me," says Warren. "I do remember — just because this is always the feeling with Prescription — they were and are some of the only people in the business who strike me as really good people."

Pasricha, it turns out, didn't have to fight that hard for Warren. She prepared a whole pitch about why the company should sign a writer without any major credits to her name. But Gottwald — then known mostly as the hitmaker behind No. 1 singles from Katy Perry and Britney Spears — only had a few questions. "Do you like her?" Pasricha, now head of A&R, West Coast, recalls him asking. *Yeah.* "Do you think she's talented?" *Super talented.* "Great." They listened to some of her songs, and he was sold.

Today, Warren is one of Prescription Songs' quintessential success stories. Her ascension to behind-the-scenes pop powerhouse has paralleled the company's own evolution from an extension of its founder's brand to an entity with a staff of 25, a roster of nearly 140 writers and three ASCAP Pop Music Award wins for independent publisher of the year. Warren has co-written 11 Billboard Hot 100 entries, including several with The Chainsmokers and two of Dua Lipa's star-making hits, "New Rules" and "Don't Start Now," the latter of which received a Grammy nomination in 2020 for song of the year (among other nods).

Prescription also had a banner 2020, with Hot 100 hits for writers and producers like KBeaZy (24kGoldn and iann dior's "Mood"), Lauren LaRue (Arizona Zervas' "Roxanne") and Doja Cat (who works with other Prescription writers and producers, including Gottwald, on many of her tracks). In 2019 and 2020, Prescription didn't appear on *Billboard's* annual list of the top 10 Hot 100 publishers, but in the latter year it jumped into the unpublished portion of the chart to No. 39 — which means it finished ahead of thousands of other publishers last year on the strength of nearly a dozen hits. The company says its fourth-quarter revenue grew 29% year over year.

That success, its executives say, shows the strength of Prescription's strategy: prioritizing gut instinct over résumés when signing songwriters, committing to long-term talent development and helping creators build sustainable careers on their own terms. "I genuinely believe that a lot of the people that we've signed, other publishers wouldn't have given a second look because they didn't have any cuts or because they didn't have the data behind them," says Katie Mitzell Fagan, head of A&R, Nashville. "We just get to do things because we're passionate about them."



That's what stands out most to Willard Ahdriz, founder/chairman of Kobalt, which does administration for Prescription among 600 or so other small publishers. "Prescription has never been a company that buys something for market share — they take their creative bets very early," says Ahdriz, who also praises "the long runway" it offers new talent.

The path to success has not been without scrutiny. In 2014, Kesha, with whom Gottwald worked on her early megahits, filed a lawsuit accusing him of sexual assault and emotional abuse (among other claims) that shocked the industry and fueled calls to #FreeKesha. Gottwald simultaneously sued her for defamation and breach of contract and has repeatedly and vehemently denied all of her accusations; his suit is ongoing, and a trial is scheduled for fall 2021, according to court documents. Kesha's claims have been dismissed by the singer voluntarily or by a judge, yet her cause has become a movement. Dozens of stars, including Adele and Taylor Swift, have supported the singer, and past Gottwald collaborators such as Kelly Clarkson and P!nk have spoken negatively about their experiences working with him, saying he was "demeaning" and "not a good person," respectively. But while Gottwald

remains persona non grata in some pop music circles, he has hardly been inactive, writing and producing for artists like Doja Cat, Saweetie and Kim Petras.

In some ways, the claims made against Gottwald and the values of the company can seem at odds. In interviews, Fagan has said that the small, tight-knit staff has a "no asshole" policy. When asked how to square this with what has been alleged about his character, Fagan summarizes her experiences with him, as other Prescription staffers do, as only positive and "empowering." The company prides itself on advancing the careers of women in the music industry: Roughly two-thirds of the employees are female, which some Prescription writers describe as a selling point. Fagan, who started out as Gottwald's assistant, counts a former assistant as an A&R manager; the company's director of creative synch and digital used to be the receptionist.

Gottwald is still the owner of Prescription Songs and steers some big-picture strategy: He spearheaded a recent partnership with bitcoin company BitPay, giving Prescription writers the option to receive royalty payments in cryptocurrency. But his day-to-day involvement is harder to generalize. Fagan and Pasricha describe him as hands-



From left: Walker, Pasricha and Fagan. "It's so important to have a diverse roster," says Fagan, "in order to make music that's going to move the needle."

on but note that he is a creative first and foremost, not a desk-job executive; they talk to him frequently, mostly just to keep him in the loop, but say he has given them tremendous leeway. Prescription staffers — who speak openly and glowingly about Gottwald — describe him mostly as a sounding board, available to give advice or help out with things like resolving split disputes. "I call him every so often to check in and keep him updated, but he's as involved as we need him to be," says Fagan, who adds that his formal approval is not necessary for signings. "I've signed a lot of things, by the way, that Luke doesn't like."

Prescription's executives believe the team's accomplishments mean more to their industry peers than any headlines about its founder — an assessment several top A&R executives that *Billboard* contacted independently would agree with. "It's one of the best-run publishing companies in the business. They're on the ball, they have great follow-through, they send great demos, they're relentless in a gracious way," says Epic Records executive vp A&R Joey Arbagey. "I honestly don't talk to Luke. I haven't talked to him for several years, and I don't really think about Luke when I'm doing business with them."

Pasricha says the period following the filing of the 2014

lawsuits "definitely wasn't the easiest of times" for the company, but she also maintains that it didn't really hurt the business. "Yeah, maybe some people didn't want to sign with us," she acknowledges. But by then, the staff was already bringing in their own writers and honing their own reputations. "I feel very fortunate that we've kind of been able to, in some ways..." — she pauses to find the right word — "overcome that? And be more than that."

At the same time, she and Prescription's other executives often point out, usually without prompting, that much of the company culture and strategy that make them successful can be traced back to Gottwald. "We're all empowered to let creative lead the way versus corporate red tape or a [profit/loss] analysis," says Sara Walker, senior vp creative synch. "Having the company founded by a songwriter and producer instills the focus on the creative." All of this occasionally makes sorting out the Venn diagram of Gottwald and Prescription tricky, even if staffers are happy to discuss him. "He's part of our company, for sure. I mean, I pitch Luke's songs. I work with his catalog. He's one of our producers," says Walker. "So, yeah. You can't separate them."

It's an ongoing calibration. This year, over a decade af-



ter its founding, the company changed its employee email domain from *drluke.com* to *prescriptionsongs.com*.



IN THE EVENING OF HER

23rd birthday, Fagan showed up at L.A.'s Conway Recording Studios for an interview with Gottwald. He was working on Britney Spears' 2011 album, *Femme Fatale*, alongside a constellation of pop hitmakers (including Max Martin and Benny Blanco) who all participated in Fagan's evaluation. To her, it was a dream come true. "I don't know if you could even call it an interview; it was just them asking me silly questions," recalls Fagan. When Martin met with her, he offered her a beer, which Fagan — whose colleagues today praise her unflappable calm — briefly panicked over whether to accept. She declined it in the end. "Good," Martin told her. "You passed your first test."

At that point, Fagan's only industry experience was a Warner Chappell Music internship, but when she sat down with Gottwald, he mostly wanted to know about her time working as a camp counselor and water ski

instructor. "I was like, 'Wait, really? *That's* what you want to know?" she says. Pasricha had a similar experience. When she interviewed with Gottwald for an A&R position in 2012, he flopped down in his seat and started a conversation so informal that she wondered if she was talking to the wrong person. While she was at Atlantic, Pasricha and Gottwald had competed to sign Becky G, so he already knew she could do the job. At one point, he asked her what her favorite dinosaurs were. It was an easy question for Pasricha, who, it turns out, is a bit of a science nerd and went to space camp in middle school: brachiosaurus, the long-necked beast featured in *Jurassic Park*.

Fagan and Pasricha were among Gottwald's earliest hires, working at first out of his house. Before they joined, there were only about a dozen writers on the roster, many of whom worked closely with Gottwald. "He really started the model of what most people emulate today: signing writers and producers to himself and using them on his projects," a source with knowledge of Prescription's early years tells *Billboard*.

But they were starting to need more support than Gottwald could give them — at least without sacrificing his own creative time. So he and former senior vp publishing Beka Tischker, whom several executives interviewed for this story credit with shaping the company's early growth, started staffing up and diversifying. "It was like, 'We need an A&R now to help keep this person's calendar going and book them sessions,'" recalls Prescription chief engineer/technical adviser Clint Gibbs, who has worked alongside Gottwald in studios for over a decade. "I'd like to say I knew the exact moment, but you just opened your eyes one day like, 'Oh! We're a company.'"

Gottwald's emphasis on hangout potential set the tone for how the company recruits new talent. "If you were to do a meeting with the whole team, you're going to learn about what we all ate last night, what we're watching on television," says Walker. Prescription writer James Droll recently reminded Fagan that he and the staff once talked about *The Princess Diaries* for 45 minutes before getting down to business. Joy Oladokun, a soulful singer-songwriter whose Twitter bio describes her as "the trap Tracy Chapman," has similar memories. "It was definitely a party," she says. Still, she was struck by the fact that the staff had actually listened to her music, unlike other companies where "people could barely remember who I was or why I was there."

After initial meetings, if Prescription is interested in moving forward, it will usually put a writer in sessions with other members of its roster to vet their work ethic, skill set and personal character — not a standard practice in pop publishing. Part of that pickiness stems from the fact that its active roster drives its revenue. "We don't have the luxury [of saying], 'If we sign this writer for X million dollars and it doesn't work out, 'Billie Jean' is going to keep the lights on for this year,'" says Pasricha. Working closely with artists till they recoup is paramount. "Unless you say stop, they're going to put you in a room seven days a week and just try everything and introduce you to everyone," says Warren. "But the fact that we'd all have to say, 'Hey, I want less sessions,' to our publisher versus, 'Pay attention to me,' is so amazing."

That also means Prescription is not the place for every writer. "Some might come to us and be like, 'Listen, I really just need a check. I've already got my train going. I don't need a lot of help,'" says Fagan. Sometimes, during early discussions with a writer, one of their songs will blow up unexpectedly — and attract other publishers dangling bigger advances. "It's not that we can't compete with that," says Pasricha. "But for us, it's just not necessarily the



Clockwise from top: Prescription songwriters Warren, JORDY, LaRue and Oladokun.



way we do business."

Prescription deals, likewise, haven't always been everyone's cup of tea. Four years ago, speaking on the popular songwriting podcast *And the Writer Is...*, Bonnie McKee said, "Luke's deals are famously bad, everybody knows that. That's fine. He's a brilliant businessman, so he's getting his — that's fine. And he gave me my career ... I don't regret it at all." Even now, says Fagan, that reputation comes up "pretty much anytime" they're talking to a writer's attorney whom they haven't worked with recently.

Over the years, she continues, the company has updated its contracts to be more in line "with what everyone else is doing." That means moving away from minimum delivery and release commitment (MDRC) provisions, which specify a quota on commercially released material, not just



songs turned in. MDRC deals have fallen out of fashion over criticism that, in certain cases, the challenges of satisfying such provisions can keep songwriters unfairly locked into deals. "From a dealmaking perspective, the music publishing business has changed dramatically over the last six to eight years," says attorney Jason Boyarski of Boyarski Fritz, who has represented a number of top songwriters and previously was senior vp/GM of Warner Chappell Music. In an MDRC deal, "you could be recouped, you could be having massive success with big royalties coming in, but you don't really have a trigger to end the deal. You're kind of stuck."

Fagan does note, however, that because Prescription typically spends several years developing young writers, its deals are usually for longer periods of time. The exact terms vary, but the company also typically does not offer full contractual reversions, meaning that its share of the publishing does not revert back to the songwriter after a set period of time. (In the United States, though, a writer can file for copyright termination of the U.S. rights and get back publishing ownership after 35 years.) A former publishing executive says this is not uncommon for companies of Prescription's size and business model — in fact, for decades, it was the standard for music publishers signing unproven talent. "I always try to explain to people that if we're going to work together this early on in your career, we're in it for the long haul," says Fagan. "The reason that our deals are the way that they are is because we are doing things differently than other companies, and we are signing people differently."

During the signing process, Prescription will usually offer to introduce writers to Gottwald, though for many recent additions to the roster it hasn't been necessary. "They're like, 'No, I'm sold, I love you guys,'" says Pasricha. But if someone does have questions about his involvement, they are happy to answer them or put them in touch with Gottwald directly. "It isn't an elephant in the room for us," says Fagan.

Writers have different reasons for asking to meet Gottwald. Some are like singer-songwriter JORDY, who signed with Prescription last fall and is known for conversational pop tunes like the TikTok favorite "Long Distance." He was impressed by his conversations with the staff, but he wanted to know if Gottwald was even aware of his music — and he didn't want to sign to a company without meeting the person at the top. When they did get on a call, they talked a lot about songwriting. "There wasn't a time when we had reservations," says JORDY's manager, Cory Andersen, who has since signed another songwriter, country-pop singer Maddie Zahm, to Prescription. "I trust that team and the people who are on that team."

Oladokun went into her meeting anticipating a very different conversation. "I was looking for a reason to say no to signing to Prescription," she recalls thinking. But she was surprised at how quickly Gottwald brought up the legal battle, and she was moved by the candor and vulnerability with which he discussed the last few years. She had some lingering concerns — "As a Black, queer woman, the last thing I want to do during a press cycle is talk about a white guy" — but in the end, she says, "I took the information I had, and I made a decision. I don't regret that decision. He has been really kind and gracious. I understand that is not everybody's feeling, but when it comes to business stuff, he has been very fair to me." Ultimately, she notes, few people even ask about him.

IN 2016, WARREN WAS BEMOANING A breakup when Pasricha shared what she now considers some cringe-worthy relationship advice she had heard: "The only way to get over someone is to get under someone else." It's not unusual for Prescription staffers and writers to have such personal relationships. "We know their birthdays, we know their significant others, we've been to weddings and baby showers," says Pasricha. "They call us when their car gets towed." And sure enough, later that week, Warren made good use of Pasricha's advice: In a writing session with Ian Kirkpatrick and Caroline Ailin, she tweaked it into one of the most memorable lyrics of Lipa's "New Rules."

Prescription Songs' small size — and the personal attention that setup provides writers — is probably its biggest selling point. It may be a cliché, but the word "family" comes up repeatedly to describe the operation. And while those close bonds — daily phone calls, unrelenting group chats — don't always translate into lyrical gold, they do improve Prescription's batting average in other ways. A few writers say they can count on one hand the number of bad sessions they've had because their A&R executives are such good studio matchmakers. "There's a lot more thought going into [setting up sessions], because they know each other so well," says Warner Records vp A&R Gabz Landman. "A&Rs at Prescription are the type of people who, if they say to me, 'Trust me, I know you've never heard of this person, but they should work with your artist,' I believe them."

Walker, a two-decade veteran of the synch world whose energy and enthusiasm is palpable even over

Zoom, has worked at companies where it was normal to never interact with her roster; at Prescription, writers can text her about synch opportunities on TV shows they watched the night before. "Nobody's ever going to wait three weeks for a response on something from our team because our writers have access to us and can call us," says Walker. "It's not like, 'Well, we've got to talk to upper management and come back to you.'"

There are few internal boundaries within the company: A&R staff can book sessions and pitch demos across its entire roster, even if the staffer didn't sign the artist or is based in a different office — "one of the things that most surprised me about joining the team," says Siara Behar, senior director, A&R.

There are also no formal genre distinctions, which has recently served Prescription well: One of its writers, Trey Campbell, contributed to 2021 Grammy nominees for best R&B, reggae and country album, while Nate Campany, who has a background in alternative music and left-field pop, has found success "writing these sexy Latin bangers," says Pasricha. "He doesn't even speak Spanish fluently!"

That freedom was what drew Lauren LaRue, who began her career in the country scene, to sign with the company after meeting her A&R executive, Hannah Montgomery, who had previously worked in Nashville and joined Prescription's L.A. office seeking similar cross-genre opportunities. "It was incredibly rare to have somebody who never put my art in any sort of box," says LaRue. (She's signed to a joint venture with Keith Urban's BOOM publishing company.) "A lot of times, that's where the best art comes from: trying a new thing, even if it seems weird."

The company has long had a relationship with Nashville. From 2013 to 2017, Prescription and Big Machine Music had a joint venture to co-publish versatile writers. But in late 2016, Fagan launched Prescription's Nashville office to invest in the city's non-country scene. Just as Nashville's rich songwriting tradition has attracted pop stars like Ed Sheeran and Kylie Minogue to its studios, it has also drawn young songwriters who don't fit into the country ecosystem. Whenever Fagan would come to town, writers, managers and even other publishers repeatedly offered to introduce her to a growing list of unsigned talent, which she recognized as a new client pool for Prescription. "I haven't left [Prescription] because I've been given the tools to succeed, and I've been heard when I have a crazy idea like, 'Hey, something's happening in Nashville, but not a lot of people know about it yet. If we get there now, we're going to be ahead of it,'" she says. "With no questions asked, [Gottwald said], 'Yes, go, go run an office there.'"

The Nashville base also provides a home to writers for whom the industry's other epicenters don't appeal. Oladokun was living in L.A. when she signed with Prescription, but she was intrigued with the way Fagan talked about the Nashville artistic community and the pace of life there. So Fagan soon set up a two-week writing trip for her; on the second day, Oladokun told her she was ready to move there permanently. "I was like, 'My work here is done,'"

recalls Fagan. She saw the folk-leaning Oladokun as "a slow build. Her music is not a viral sensation. She's a very particular songwriter, and she knows what she wants. So it has been a lot of development on that side, just figuring out what works and what doesn't work for her."

Indeed, for a company so closely associated with top 40 pop hits, Prescription has a number of less commercially inclined writers, like Ethel Cain, who writes haunting, rootsy alt-pop from the perspective of a disgruntled preacher's wife, or acts like Vancouver Sleep Clinic and Dave Thomas Junior, who make delicate, almost ambient music. "We don't look at what we're doing as one size fits all," says Walker. "If your goal is to get the Dua Lipa cuts, let's figure out how we can help you do that. But if your goal is to make stripped-down ballads about heartbreak, let's find a way for you to continue to do that also."

Sometimes that means leaning into synch opportunities: Walker recently scored a high-profile placement in *Station 19*, the ABC *Grey's Anatomy* spinoff, for a song that Prescription writer Grace Fulmer had composed entirely in, of all languages, Latin. For other writers, that means looking for new revenue streams and taking on responsibilities atypical of music publishers. Writers' fees — an upfront sum of money to simply work with one — are not the norm in pop songwriting, but Montgomery says Prescription is "trying to make them more common" for its roster's sake. In some cases, the company has also secured streaming bonuses (a payment if a song hits a certain number of streams), holding fees (for when an artist is deciding whether to record a song) and royalty points on a song's master. "We're really taking the time to look under the hood of how writers can make money because it's not easy right now," says Montgomery. "When I say, 'We can't promise anyone a No. 1, but we can promise that you can live a sustainable life as a creative,' we mean it."

Fighting for writers, helping them pay their bills by doing whatever they want — that's what Prescription executives want people to think of first when they picture the company. When asked how she feels about those various perceptions of the company, Pasricha says, "I feel like I just want to keep my head down and work."

They also know what's out of their control: That Prescription's legacy will be determined, to some degree, by how the industry defines it, and what it decides matters. The writers and managers interviewed for this story all give some variation of the same advice about finding publishing deals: Sign with the people, not the company. Take away the name, the track records, the talking points and consider: Is this a person you want to talk to every day for the next five years? Will they champion you? Every writer is different, and every deal has its pros and cons, the trade-offs and the opportunities. But in the end, the equation often works out the same.

"I grew up in church, so I always go back to Bible verses," says Oladokun, and there's one that comes to mind when she thinks about Prescription: "You'll know a tree by its fruit." **B**

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—MONTGOMERY

WARREN: DANIEL DUNN/GETTY IMAGES; JORDY: DANTE REASER/GETTY IMAGES; LA RUE: KATE NAL OLADOKUN; SHANNON BEVERIDGE