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Turning out hits again at Capitol Records

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff 02.10.15



LOS ANGELES — When Steve Barnett became the boss at Capitol Records, the first thing he did was clean out the offices.

The award-winning records on the walls and the cute cardboard cutout of the Beatles went away. They were a symbol of the challenge Barnett faced to turn around the record company. Capitol was so stuck in the past that it could not think about the future, Barnett said.

Capitol Records was founded in 1942 in Los Angeles and has recorded albums for famous music stars including the Beatles, Beach Boys and Frank Sinatra.

Picking Musical Winners

Before Barnett became chairman of Capitol Records Group, he was president of Columbia Records. Columbia was the top record label in the United States and Capitol was fifth-largest. In just over two years since Barnett, 62, became chairman, Capitol has become the second-largest.

The company also owns other famous record labels like Motown and Blue Note.

A big part of Capitol's improvement has been Barnett's ability to anticipate the future and to pick artists that could become big stars. In 2014, Capitol had two of the biggest new artists of the year: British singer-songwriter Sam Smith and the Australian boy band 5 Seconds of Summer.

The 2015 Grammy awards nominations were another sign of Capitol's comeback. Capitol artists got 46 nominations. Sam Smith and Bastille, a British pop band also on the Capitol label, were nominated for Grammys as best new artist. Smith got six nominations for his debut album, including the rare feat for a new artist, being nominated in the top four awards: best record, album, song and new artist.

A Long, Winding Road

Capitol had been hurt by changes in the music business during the last decade. Music lovers went from buying CDs to downloading songs and albums, then to streaming music online. Other record companies were also dealing with those changes, but Capitol was managed badly, said experts in the music industry. It did not invest on developing new artists and did not deal well with the changes.

A little over two years ago, the company was bought by Universal Music Group. Capitol had lost its way and the new owners wanted to invest money to turn it around, said Lucian Grainge, chairman of Universal Music.

The first step was to hire the right leader, Grainge said. He hired Barnett, who had been a manager for rockers AC/DC, Cyndi Lauper and other musicians. When he was running Columbia Records, the label introduced artists including British soul singer Adele, the boy band One Direction and the indie-rock group Foster the People.

Just like Grainge, Barnett has been a fan of the artists on Capitol's labels for a long time. As a kid growing up in England, Barnett liked some of Capitol's most famous acts. He liked the Beatles, the Beach Boys and the Band.

Discovering Stars

Barnett moved Capitol from New York back to its home in Los Angeles. Thirty employees and their families moved 3,000 miles across the country. Barnett also decided to restore the Capitol Tower in Los Angeles, a historic building where the label got started. He offered empty offices to other Universal Music labels including Motown.

Barnett said Capitol's job is to develop artists and he made a point of finding new acts that could become stars. It helps set the label apart from the rest of the Universal Music Group. Many record labels specialize in a sound, such as Blue Note with jazz, or Motown with soul.

Barnett said he felt safe betting on Sam Smith. That hunch has paid off. Smith's "In the Lonely Hour" was the third-biggest album of 2014. Only Taylor Swift's "1989" and the "Frozen" soundtrack sold more copies. Katy Perry's "Prism" album also did very well for Capitol. It sold 1.5 million copies, including downloads.

Smith said he decided to sign with Capitol because the executives there showed a passion for his songs. He told The Times that he only saw that passion when he sang for Nick Raphael, the head of Capitol in England.

Smith said it was a done deal when he met with Steve Barnett. "There was such a warmth, a passion and a respect for what I did," Smith said. "Steve Barnett and Nick Raphael have done everything they ever said they would do, and more."

It Looks And Sounds New

Richard Griffiths, manager of One Direction and 5 Seconds of Summer, says Barnett was the reason both groups signed with his record companies. One Direction signed with Columbia Records when Barnett was in charge. And 5 Seconds signed with Capitol after Barnett joined.

Grainge and Barnett would not say how much the new owners have spent on Capitol. But Barnett said a walk through Capitol's offices could help figure it out. Offices have been renovated and repainted, and there is new equipment in Capitol's three recording studios.

Grainge said the changes are not part of some big business shakeup. Universal Music wanted to nurture Capitol back to success by helping its people and bringing in new artists and workers. The employees had the skills, talent and dedication. Now that they have been nurtured, they got their groove back, he said. Two years later, Capitol is on a new path.

"I think we're in the game," Barnett said.

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Study suggests starting too young to play tackle football isn't a good idea

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

02.03.15



When is it safe to play tackle football? A new study published Wednesday in the journal *Neurology* suggests that kids may want to wait until they are at least 12 years old.

Researchers wanted to know if kids who start playing tackle football earlier in life develop differently than

kids who start playing later on. To try to find out, they gathered a group of former National Football League (NFL) players and tested their cognitive abilities, such as memory, attention and ability to reason and process information.

The researchers found that the players who had started playing football before age 12 performed an average of 20 percent worse on tests than those who had started after their 12th birthday.

Pro Players Split Into Two Groups

The study looked at 42 former professional football players between the ages of 41 and 65. They fell into two groups: half started playing tackle football before they were 12, and the other half started when they were 12 or older.

Researchers organized the players for comparison, matching each player with someone in the other group who was a similar age and size. They wanted to make sure that the only significant difference between the players was the age at which they started playing football.

The players were then given a series of cognitive tests. A memory test, for instance, required the players to remember a list of words immediately after it had been read to them, and then again 15 minutes later.

Players were also asked to organize a deck of cards based on various characteristics. This tested their mental flexibility and problem-solving skills. Finally, to gauge their verbal intelligence, researchers asked players to read and pronounce a long list of uncommon words.

On all three tests, the players who had started playing tackle football earlier in life performed significantly worse than their counterparts. The findings suggest that the participants who started playing football before the age of 12 had developed less cognitive ability as a result.

Brain's Development During Childhood

Bob Stern, a professor of neurology at Boston University School of Medicine, was the lead author of the study. He said that the research team chose the age of 12 as the dividing line because it is an important time for the brain.

“Other research has shown that the brain undergoes key periods of development during childhood,” he said. He explained that “several brain structures and functions reach a peak or plateau leading up to the age of 12 in males.” In other words, a great deal of brain development takes place in the years before a child's 12th birthday.

The study's findings may be of interest to a lot of young football players and their families. According to researchers Christopher Filley and Charles Bernick, 70 percent of all football players in the U.S. are younger than 14. Players between 9 and 12 are exposed to an average of 240 head impacts in a single football season.

While Filley and Bernick applauded the new study as “innovative,” they also noted that it had some major limitations. Studies often try to draw conclusions about the general population by looking at a representative sample group. It is possible, though, that the sample group will be different in one way or another from the general population.

This study only looked at 42 people, a relatively small sample. Maybe this particular group of players was unusual in some way, or the difference in their cognitive abilities was coincidental. Filley and Bernick suggested that a larger study group would have provided more reliable evidence.

Study Has Limitations

Also, all of the participants in the study were professional athletes. Pros may be different than the average person who plays football as a kid but does not go on to play in the NFL. What is true of professional players may not be true of everyone.

Finally, Filley and Bernick noted that all of the players who participated in the study had been experiencing symptoms of cognitive, behavioral and mood problems in the previous six months. This is another way in which the players may have been different from the general population. Given this difference, the results of the study may not apply to other groups of people.

Stern agreed with the criticism and admitted that the study had limitations.

“Since we only dealt with former NFL players we can't generalize to people who played up to college or high school; we can't generalize to other sports; we can't generalize to girls,” he said.

However, if common sense tells parents that it's not a great idea to put a kid at risk of getting a head injury during a time when the brain is doing some important development work, this study seconds that notion, he said. “Common sense may be right,” he added.

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Business is blooming this Valentine's Day for Colombia

By Miami Herald, adapted by Newsela staff

02.12.15



BOGOTA, Colombia — Many of the red roses and other flowers that are such a central part of Valentine’s Day come from one place. They are picked from the fields around Colombia's capital city of Bogota.

Fifty years ago, Colombia shipped its first batch of fresh-cut flowers to Miami. Since then, Colombian flowers have grown into a billion dollar industry.

Back when that first batch of Colombian flowers was shipped, flowers in the United States were expensive luxury goods sold only at specialized shops. Today, they are available widely. They now can be bought everywhere from grocery stores to gas stations to street corners.

As flower sales increased in the United States, Colombia became a global flower power. The country will export 500 million flowers for Valentine’s Day and 3 out of every 4 stems delivered for the occasion will likely come from here.

Planting Seeds

The story of how Colombia became the world’s second-largest flower exporter can be traced back to a handful of adventurous businessmen and a clever college student.

The godfather of the nation’s flower trade was Edgar Wells. A Colombian of English descent, he saw the astronomical flower prices in Washington, D.C., and recognized the business opportunity.

At the time, most of America’s fresh-cut flowers were coming from California and Colorado, and were rare, expensive and reserved for special occasions.

Wells returned home and set up a flower company, named Flores Colombianas. He made his first shipment to Miami in October 1965.

Charles Weston is 83 years old now but he began managing Flores Colombianas in 1969. “He saw that Washington was full, full of socialites and all they did was go to parties and take each other presents, which were often flowers,” Weston said of Wells. “He said, ‘Why don’t we get into that business.’”

His timing was perfect. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress, which aimed to create a better relationship between the United States and its Latin American neighbors. Colombia was made a showcase for the effort.

Business Sprouts ...

To help Colombia develop its agricultural industry, the United States sent university researchers and agricultural experts to the country. One of them was a Colorado State University student named David Cheever. Inspired by Wells' work, Cheever wrote a paper in 1967 about Bogota providing flowers for countries around the world.

Cheever saw opportunity in Colombia's climate and its high-altitude plains. He noted too that newly introduced jet flights from Bogota to Miami made going back and forth between Colombia and the United States easier than ever.

Cheever's paper changed the flower industry forever. John Vaughan, a Colombian of English descent, was one of the first to get into the new flower industry. In 1969, he and two brothers started growing carnations on a 2.5-acre plot of land.

At the time, there were only two other growers, including Flores Colombianas, but the flower rush was on. Cheever himself decided to put his ideas to the test by launching Flor America that same year.

... Then Grows ...

In the beginning, the pioneers were collaborators rather than competitors, Vaughan said, and Cheever was seen as an innovator.

"We used to just copy what (Cheever) did," Vaughan said. The greenhouse structures that are still in use today on flower farms were largely developed by him. "He was very generous with his ideas and knowledge."

The early years were trial and error, and Vaughan recalls having to hand-carry boxes of flowers to Miami.

Buyers were hard to find at first, but eventually Vaughan helped convince U.S. grocery stores that flowers made sense.

"They work by the square foot," he said of chain stores such as Costco and Walmart. "So we had to prove to them that it was better to have flowers than, say, Campbell's soup — that's a tough sell."

... And Blossoms

Things began to take off in the early 1970s after Weston established El Dorado Trading Company in Miami.

"After that, flowers were going straight into refrigeration, and we had sales girls who could talk to all of the cities in the United States," he said.

The industry has only blossomed since then. Now, there are an estimated 350 flower growers in Colombia who employ 130,000 workers. The industry shipped 200,000 tons of flowers in 2013 worth about \$1.3 billion.

The future looks even brighter, according to Colombian Agriculture Minister Aurelio Iragorri.

Soon, many people in the U.S. "will not only want flowers for Valentine's Day but as a year-round consumer good," he said.