

VISION OF THE FUTURE

There's an A&R revolution going on and **Cre8ing Vision** is pulling the strings. Geared towards offering a new generation a pathway into the industry, its A&R focus groups can stake a claim to a growing number of hits including viral smash People by **Libianca**. Here, co-directors **Kwame Kwaten**, **Andrea Euell** and **Nicola Charles**, plus executive advisor **Nick Raphael** and alumni **Melanie Ijeh**, **Ree Sewell**, **Marley Azu-Jones** and **Cameron Featherstone**, reveal how their work is changing the face of breaking talent...

WORDS: JAMES HANLEY

PHOTOS: PAUL HARRIES

Cast a glance at the British music industry of 2023, and it won't take long to find Cre8ing Vision's fingerprints. The social enterprise, established in 2010 by co-directors Kwame Kwaten, Andrea Euell and Nicola Charles, is best known for The Ultimate Seminar, its free annual summit for young people aspiring to work in the business, but embarked on a new chapter around five years ago.

It all began when A&R expert Kwaten, MD of artist management company Ferocious Talent, was approached by a label services firm looking to scour CV's 10,000-strong database of would-be execs, setting off a chain of events that would change lives and alter the landscape of UK A&R in the process.

"It was all sparked by one ask from a label services company, which came to us for one A&R intern, specifically about UK Black music," says Kwaten. "We sent it out to our database, which is essentially made up of people that come to the Seminar, expecting maybe 30 or 40 people to reply to say they were interested – and 250 replied."

Those 250 applicants were whittled down to 70, who were divided into seven groups of 10. The classes were subsequently trained up via monthly A&R focus groups – sometimes lasting up to four hours at a time – held in a boardroom lent by Believe. The "talking shop" sessions often focused on the discovery of below-the-radar acts, with a winning format established whereby each scout played two songs and outlined why the acts had the potential to release a hit single.

"For a year, we would have these meetings in a tiny room," remembers Kwaten. "We would meet and discuss anything new that was hot, because we had to work out what would be useful.

Label services companies felt they were losing out to the new crop of major label A&Rs, so were thinking, 'We want to get to new talent ahead of the data people the majors are using.'"

From those 70 initial participants, a core group of 30 was selected for the A&R scout pool, from which Cre8ing Vision now chooses 10 for each focus group. Each applicant was able to pitch their artist, gain feedback from A&Rs and experience what goes on behind the scenes.

After that first year, Believe signed Vianni and Ghetto Boy, attracting the attention of major companies. Over time, CV began holding focus group sessions at Capitol, Warner, Sony, Since '93, Island, Virgin, YMU and Columbia.

"While we were developing it, we were like, 'Maybe this can work not just for label services, but be an actual service for any kind of label?'" says Kwaten.

"Word started to spread amongst labels and A&Rs," recalls Euell, who has a background in PR. "We were getting calls saying, 'We're looking for such and such artists, could you bring some of your scouts in?' And we've started to see the employability from all of that. That's the next phase."

Scouts receive a finders' fee if a label or services company goes on to negotiate any deals with their artists. A legacy has already emerged from the initiative, with notable alumni including A&R Ree Sewell at AWAL, artist manager Marley

Azu-Jones, ex-Island Records consultant Cameron Featherstone and 5K Records' Melanie Ijeh. In just two years, CV's distinct methods have laid the foundations for more than 600 million streams.

"You've got books on the music industry, but in order to make the learning stick, you need the audio and that is where we sit," offers Kwaten. "Also, looking at it in plain financial terms, the amount generated by A&R focus group-associated acts in the last year-and-a-half is over £2 million. So we know what it's worth and we know that it's working. There are armies of people now working beneath the acts that have been discovered."

Charles considers the essential qualities someone needs to succeed in A&R in the modern business.

"They need to be creative in how they work, innovative in how they think and very fast-forward in their movement because – and I always say this – technology is forever changing," she says. "The way that we operate is forever changing, and the ways in which artists would come about or be brought forward has changed drastically from 10 years ago to the current day."

Charles says the new generation is creating a platform for their own success.

"The ones that have been successful have not followed the expected path to get there," she says. "They didn't have massive funding from the big labels, yet

"These acts
have generated over
£2 million in the past 18
months, so we know that
it is working"
KWAME KWATEN



Who do you think you A&R:
(Clockwise from top left) Nick Raphael,
Andrea Euell, Ree Sewell, Nicola Charles,
Marley Azu-Jones, Melanie Ijeh, Cameron
Featherstone and Kwame Kwaten

“A&Rs need to be creative in
how they work, innovative
in how they think and very
fast-forward in
their movement”

NICOLA CHARLES

Talent spotters:
(Clockwise from top) Nicola
Charles, Kwame Kwaten
and Andrea Euell

they're able to find artists that go on to be well recognised and highly streamed."

Above all, Euell notes the initiative provides a different path into the music industry from the tried and tested ones.

"We're a new route in – one where a lot of young people can feel very comfortable, can very much be themselves and express themselves quite freely and that's really important," she says. "Sometimes if you go into a bigger company, there are more rules to follow, whereas here it's very organic. You also see the confidence grow in each person. When they start, they can be quiet. But by the end, they can go into a boardroom and sit alongside senior execs and be able to put their opinions forward. That's great to see."

The scheme has had an influential supporter from an early stage in former Capitol Records co-president Nick Raphael, who joined the Cre8ing Vision team as executive advisor to the A&R focus group last year. Raphael previously signed Drea Mac and FelixThe1st's viral track Own Brand Freestyle to Capitol via the focus group. The 2021 single has more than 105m plays on Spotify.

"I was a beneficiary and inspired by what Cre8ing Vision were doing, hence why I have offered my support," explains Raphael.

FelixThe1st's manager Marley Azu-Jones and producer Finch Fetti were both graduates of the Cre8ing Vision system.

"Through my initial sessions with Cre8ing Vision, I came into contact with a variety of people that later became my music tribe," says Azu-Jones, founder of The N3xt Up and co-founder of Back 2 Basics. "Finch Fetti is an amazing producer who I went on to connect with my younger brother FelixThe1st. I initially asked Felix to create a Spotify playlist of beats that he liked and sent it to Finch and asked him to create some beats that were similar to the playlist. Then, Finch suggested that they should just have a session and in early 2021 they cooked up Own Brand Freestyle, which went on to have a crazy reception across social media and led to interest from label execs in the UK and US."

Cre8ing Vision, which launched youth mentoring and employment project The Ultimate Music Circle in 2020, and expanded into recruitment with Cre8ing Recruits last year, connected Azu-Jones with Raphael, who sealed the deal.

"I said I would love to work with him and [EGA Distro chairman & president] Colin Batsa," adds Azu-Jones. "A few rounds of negotiations later and FelixThe1st's record was signed to Capitol."

Furthermore, Kwaten suggests it was a signing that exemplifies what Cre8ing Vision seeks to bring to the table.

"The point really here – and Nick said this – was that we were ahead of the data people," he asserts. "Focus groups aren't here to replace anything; it's a weird evolution. You had A&R people back in the day who just used their ears and their heart and went with it. Then you had people using data in A&R in a loose way, and then data people literally began to be placed in major label A&R meetings. Their thing wasn't, 'I can hear a tune,' it was, 'SoundCloud, Instagram, Facebook are sending me metrics stating that this song is hot.'"

Kwaten reveals that Raphael was interested in the focus groups because data-focused staff within labels were beginning to dictate signings.

"In one way that was good, but the



Cre8ing history:

Nick Raphael and (above) Raphael with fellow panellists at a Cre8ing Vision event

Kwaten says this approach was critical.

"If you are going to beat the data analysts, you have to be fleet of foot, you've got to be quick-thinking," he says. "You have to be innovative because you can't do it on numbers. And it comes from passion. Listen, data will always be there. Old-style A&R will always be there as well. We're just another way of doing it. In time, I wouldn't be surprised if focus groups became a regular staple. Well, we're already there – we hold them every month now at different labels."

Kwaten also clears up a common misconception about CV.

"We always used to get asked by labels, 'If you've just been at Capitol Records, surely you're just playing us the same things?' And we're like, 'No, because we're bringing you a different set of 10 people,'" he says. "Secondly, we'll play 20 songs in an A&R focus group. One month, none of them will hit, but we will come in with a different set of 20 the next month for another label, and they'll go, 'That's really good, we want to be in contact with those people.'"

Raphael credits Cre8ing Vision with tapping into "new avenues in A&R", even going so far as to state it is "building an entire new generation of execs".

"By giving each young creative valuable guidance, they then enter the majors, indies, publishing and management meetings feeling empowered," says Raphael. "They are also untainted by the A&R system – they are fresh and enthusiastic. They come at it with a different lens, which can be refreshing, but anyone reading this who thinks they can sit in one Cre8ing Vision meeting and find a 100 million-plus streaming song or an artist project will be bitterly disappointed. There are diamonds in these meetings, but they may take a minute to shine or take a few meetings for you to understand what you are looking for. Senior execs, publishers, label presidents should probably also be attending these focus groups. Their next A&R superstar is amongst Cre8ing Vision's candidates..."

For proof, look no further than 5K A&R manager Melanie Ijeh. After securing a job at the 2K Management offshoot via Cre8ing Vision, she signed breakout star Libianca, who hit No.2 with 2022's *People* and boasts 11.3m monthly Spotify listeners.

"It feels great to be able to say I've worked with an artist who is so talented, whose music speaks volumes and the world has so rightly received," Ijeh tells *Music Week*. "Cre8ing Vision gave me my first start in music in their A&R focus groups. They helped me become

"Senior execs, publishers and presidents should attend the focus groups, the next A&R superstars are in there"
NICK RAPHAEL

more confident in my ear and to trust my gut, but also taught me to spot potential hurdles and how to work through them. They've been a great support system and always champion new executives regardless of their background."

Ijeh sums up her message to aspiring A&Rs. "Trust your ear, but also expand it too," she says. "Continue to listen to the current market as well as researching the past, and take every opportunity as it comes."

Kwaten views Ijeh's journey as the embodiment of what Cre8ing Vision is striving to achieve.

"The great thing about Mel as a story is that she has been through every stage of Cre8ing Vision," he points out. "She worked at the Seminar and was at the kick off of the focus groups, in that original batch, and went from there to Cre8ing Recruits. Then, when she was looking for another job within the industry, Cre8ing Recruits linked her to 5K."

Another success story is AWAL artist support manager Ree Sewell, who signed future Grammy winner Ghetto Boy while working in A&R for Believe.

"You need platforms like Cre8ing Vision to give you access into the industry, removing the barriers to entry by sharing experiences and musical journeys," says Sewell. "I learned about the different roles that were available in the industry, as you only tend to hear about marketing and A&R. From this, I learned how many execs have built their own pathway and which opportunities were created from that and how to turn your skills, side-hustles and passions into a career."

Sewell notes that Ultimate Seminar and Cre8ing Vision "put you in the rooms and the buildings of the people living it".

"It connects you with people on their music journey at all levels to build your own network," she says.

Word of mouth spread far enough to reach the likes of Cameron Featherstone, who hails from a small village outside Hertfordshire. The A&R consultant speaks glowingly about Cre8ing Vision.

"A friend of mine who used to take part in the A&R focus groups told me about Cre8ing Vision, so I gathered some acts to submit and applied almost immediately," he says. "Shortly afterwards, they invited me to attend my first A&R meeting. I had spent about five years dreaming of what the inside of a record label would look like, and within a week I found myself sitting inside the BMG boardroom, pitching artists to the head of A&R and the rest of their team."

That was in March 2022 and, thanks to Cre8ing Vision, Featherstone attended several further meetings.

"After that, I was offered a contract at Island by November that same year," he beams. "I've now finished at Island, but thanks to the connections I made, I still consult for a few labels and have just started working with [Raphael's new venture] NWS Music Group – all thanks to Nicola, Andrea and Kwame."

Kwaten says support for aspiring A&Rs has been lacking at times in the past, but believes that has changed for the better.

"I think there is a lot more," he says. "But ours is a different approach. We're not going in there with one A&R, we're going in with 10."

"When we first started out, the database was about 50 A&Rs," remarks Charles. "We now have over 500 A&Rs across the UK and it's growing every day. In terms of the establishments that use this initiative, it was probably one or two in the first year. Every year we now have in excess of 10 establishments, and before they were asking for one session. Now, they're asking for three to five, so that, in itself, illustrates the success of A&R focus groups as the years have progressed."

Charles, however, admits there are no guarantees.



Breaking big:
FelixTheist (top)
and Libianca
(bottom) both rose
to fame with the help
of Cre8ing Vision
A&R focus groups

"We're not promising a golden outcome," she says. "We're very real about how it works. We're not saying, 'Come to us, we're going to guarantee that your artist is going to fly,' it's purely about giving you that experience for you to grow from it. There are not any setbacks as such, we're just giving you the reality of the situation."

She also points out that A&R is not for everyone.

"You might find that being an A&R is just not what you actually want to do," she says. "We've had someone come to a session and say, 'I don't really like having to go to events or look for artists' and we were flabbergasted. But at the same time, their way of doing it might be to scan the internet – Justin Bieber was discovered on YouTube. But again, we're not selling a golden dream, we're selling the reality. We're providing the opportunity to understand what it is you need to do to be in the race for that role..."

"But without the pressure that is normally applied to a new A&R person when they walk into a major or indie label," interjects Kwaten. "We're able to iron out quite a lot before they hit the main place, so they're free to make mistakes, if you get my drift."

Regardless, Charles has zero concerns regarding the level of talent coming through.

"There's talent everywhere, it's just about giving it the opportunity to be seen," she adds. "We're free, because we're creating an opportunity where we have removed all barriers to entry and giving you a platform to showcase how you work, and learn at the same time. We've continually added initiatives that provide a support all year round."

Charles notes that CV's impact leads to new blood filling roles across the business.

"We create employment, within Cre8ing Vision, we give people opportunities: videographers, film crews, streaming companies..." she says. "We also look at ways to develop and provide work experience, so there

isn't a limit to what we want to do because we're always adding more. Everyone's got different goals and objectives because everyone's at different levels, so you're trying to cater for all of that."

Indeed, development has become an increasing focal point.

"What became obvious is that many of the people attending, even though they wanted to get into A&R, didn't have the skills to be able to do that – they needed about a year's worth of development to be able to present their goods," says Kwaten. "A person would come in and go, 'This is what I want to get into.' And we realised, 'Hold on, there's a stage before that needs to happen.' We took that on so they could hit the ground running."

"We've managed and developed individuals for 12-to-18 months through those programmes and now we're seeing significant progression," adds Euell. "There's always a support system at Cre8ing Vision, one way or another. If it's not us three, we will connect them with somebody else."

Cre8ing Vision continued its regional expansion with an event at Manchester's Band On The Wall venue last September, before staging its biggest edition yet of its flagship Ultimate Seminar at IET London: Savoy Place in November. Past speakers have included David Joseph, Darcus Beese, Mathew Knowles, MistaJam, Fraser T Smith, Kanya King, Ben Mawson, Stacey Tang, Colin Batsa, Negla Abdela and Stormzy.

As 2024 kicks off, the possibilities remain huge.

"We've been approached to do other events: classical events, Afrobeats events," reveals Charles. "The good thing about Cre8ing Vision is if we are able to make it happen and it makes sense, then we have always strived to achieve it."

"We've worked together for so long, so we can just get things done," finishes Euell. "It doesn't even feel like a job any more, it's something that we love."

"You see the confidence grow in each person, by the end, they can put their opinions forward in boardrooms"

ANDREA EUELL

“Cre8ing Vision helped me to be more confident in my ear and to trust my gut”

MELANIE IJIEH
5K RECORDS



In focus: Cameron Featherstone, Ree Sewell, Melanie Ijeh and Marley Azu-Jones