

BENNY POUGH IS NOW CEO OF HIS OWN ELITE enterprise, DVERSE Media, “a full service global music distribution and publishing company” with the goal of disrupting the indie label recording industry. Formerly he was President of the entertainment agency founded by Jay-Z, Roc Nation, Executive Vice President of Epic Records, and Senior Vice President of Def Jam Recordings. Those are just the most recent steps in a 30-year turn across the music business game board that saw him help launch the careers of Boyz II Men, Justin Bieber, Kanye West, Future

THE RISE & RISE OF

and many others. Along the way, he’s also developed a keen talent for real estate and, most recently, has become the author of a much-anticipated self-motivation and leadership guide.

Brunswick invited Pough to talk to our internal employee resource group (ERG), BEAT (Black Employees and Allies Together). The ERG focuses on building awareness of lived experiences that are often overlooked in the workplace and, because they are unspoken, can raise barriers in communication. It celebrates Black culture, and offers a way for Black employees to take ownership of their background and gives potential allies a view into Black identities and challenges.

Pough was only too happy to help out. “This is what makes a difference and makes a change in an organization,” he commented during the webinar. “You’re stepping out of the comfort zone, having vision, while being thankful, being humble.”

The future media mogul lived in a drafty attic apartment as a child. He made his first mark while a student at Saint John’s University in Queens as a stand-up comic, supporting himself with a string of jobs in sales. A promoter spotted the energetic young man and invited him, though he had no music experience, to become an intern at Motown Records in its New York office.

“The neighborhood I’m from, there was never conversation or dialogue about internships,” Pough

From humble beginnings, the businessman became a king-maker in the music business. He talks to Brunswick’s employees in a conversation led by **ANTHONY APPLEWHAITE** and **ERIKA BELL**.

recalls. “I didn’t know what it was. But I said, ‘Yeah, I can do that.’ I had sold cutlery door to door. I’d worked for Citibank selling their financial products. I actually sold fax machines as well. So I figured, you know, an internship, I could knock that out of the park, whatever that thing is.”

The job paid \$25 a week. But the support he received there was incalculable. “They could see something in me that I didn’t necessarily see in myself. That’s value, not knowing that people are watching you and that they’re willing to take a risk and a chance on you, even though you’re

not really at that point of understanding yourself what’s required.”

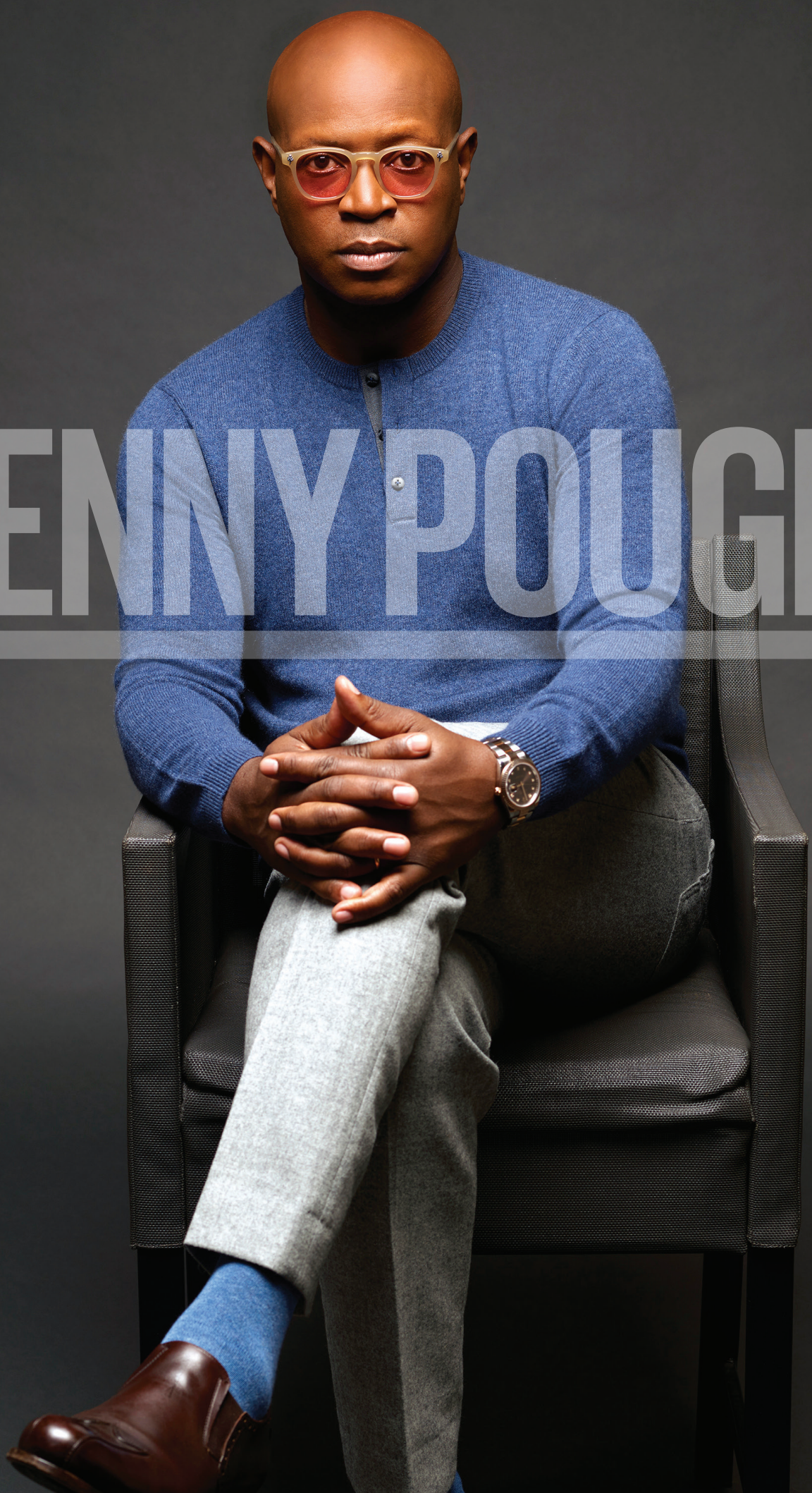
While at Motown he met some of their biggest artists and helped coordinate the first promotional tour for Boyz II Men. From there he worked for Janet Jackson’s producers, and then Arista Records (“the Rolls-Royce of the music business” at the time, he says). The label represented Whitney Houston, Toni Braxton and Usher, among other artists. There he helped launch the career of a young Monica, whose 1998 album *The Boy is Mine* went triple platinum.

After a brief stint at MCA he found himself in the rarefied offices of Def Jam Recordings, the same year that Jay-Z became its president. The famously insular company let in few outsiders. Pough had to take a “six-figure pay cut” to take the job.

“But I said, ‘I’m gonna bet on myself.’ And that changed my life exponentially. We had an opportunity to bring in some really astounding acts. Rihanna walked in the building. We had *The Emancipation of Mimi*, Mariah Carey’s album. Justin Bieber was brought into the organization through Usher, who I’d seen a decade prior and has now evolved into a businessman and is identifying talent himself. Jay-Z’s *Black Album* drops.”

From Def Jam, he went to Epic Records, where he signed Future and Yo Gotti and saw careers of artists like Travis Scott and 21 Savage advance. He is

BENNY POUGH



credited with leading his Epic team to become the #1 Urban Record Label of the Year in 2017.

While he was at Epic, his thriving career was almost ended by a near-fatal car crash while riding with a close friend. He sustained extensive injuries, including a concussion, fractured vertebrae and a lacerated liver that required years of recovery. The crash changed him forever.

“What could’ve been perceived as the worst moment in my life, God transformed me,” he says. He began to consider passing on the knowledge and experiences that had made him a music business legend. Now a finished book, *On IMPACT*, that collected wisdom will be released this year.

“IMPACT is an acronym that stands for Intuition, Mastery, Pivot, Authenticity, Connections and Teamwork,” he says. “The book takes you through my journey from 11 years old, and all of the challenges of delivering newspapers, to modern day. At the end of each chapter there’s a hit list of takeaways from the chapter. I hope you can read them and go pretty much, ‘If Benny can do it, I can do it too.’”

In the following edited excerpts of a conversation led by Brunswick’s Tony Applewhaite and Erika Bell, Pough led off by recounting how the correct pronunciation of his last name—“Pough” sounds like “pugh”—served as an early motivator, teaching him the importance of proving himself in order to turn an obstacle into an asset, which became an important foundation for his work ethic.

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining our speaker series with Benny Pough. Benny has an amazing story to tell. We are so excited to have him. Benny, we really appreciate you joining.

Thank you. You know, my name can be pronounced a lotta ways. Phonetically, you could say Po or, like tough, you could say “Puff.” People try all kinds of ways.

At an early age though I decided to brand myself as Benny Pough. My sister and I grew up in a five-family house. We lived in the attic. Winters were really cold because there was no insulation. And then the summers were really hot. But how crazy was it with a name like Pough that there would be skunks that lived sometimes under our house or in the nearby community? They would have an interaction with cats or dogs or raccoons, they would spray and it would permeate the house. So my sister, Regina, and I, there would be times that we would go to school literally smelling like skunks. “Pepé, Pepé”—children can be mean.

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Something that you can’t change, as simple as your name, could be negative. But at that point in my life, I realized that I wanted my name to have impact. And that led me to my journey of making sure that my name resonated and mattered. And I’m in the process of doing that every day of my life. So that’s why it’s Benny Pough always.

What did mentorship mean to you?

I started at a Black company by chance. I didn’t plan it. But it was so powerful, the fact of realizing that the community wouldn’t let me fail. I was surrounded by people who took an investment in my career. They took an investment in my life. They were willing to share information that would be valuable later in the business. They were hard. They were tough. But they weren’t going to allow me to fail.

That was a great start, but now there’s a pivot involved: understanding how in business everyone’s not going to like you. Everyone’s not going to pour into you. There’s research you might have to do on your own. You have to understand the value of showing up every day and doing your work because you don’t know who’s watching you. The second-biggest opportunity I got came while I was at MCA Records from a gay white woman who saw something in me and I never knew she was watching me. She gave me my really big shot.

Business people understand business. And that’s what’s moved me through business, Black or white, is that business people will understand business. But it’s also true that as minorities, it’s important to create a network and a system for people to get a shot. Because if we don’t have the farm league you’ll never get to the majors. Everybody needs to create their farm league.

You’ve talked about spirituality in how you describe that defining moment of the car crash. Spirituality is another thing that we really don’t talk about at work, but it’s a part of who we are. Did that play a role in your career?

I grew up in a Christian home. My mother was really Christian, like, I never saw her in a pair of jeans or a pair of pants—because there’s a scripture somewhere in the Bible about “Women should...” I’m like, “Really, ma?” Sundays were really the Sabbath.

What she sculpted in me made me unwavering in a lot of things. So, in my career, I saw others who were willing to compromise themselves to go to the party, to get invited to the executive’s house or be asked out to dinner or just say certain things. What people understood about me was that I had conviction

in who I was as a person. And that came from my spiritual foundation. I was cool with not being cool. But ultimately not being cool is what made me effective in work and why everybody wanted to make me cool. Because I was a trustworthy voice and opinion and cornerstone of truth for them. My integrity means more to me than money.

And because of that, it becomes important for us to think about how we prepare. I realized early in the business, when I got to Arista Records, there were no salt-and-pepper-hair Black men retiring. It was a young man's business. So that's when I decided to come up with my second plan A, which was real estate. Every bonus that I had for the last two decades, I bought a condo. I bought another condo. I bought a single-family house. I bought a multi-family house. I bought six units. I bought 18 units. I even at one point got to a city block just because at the end of the day I knew that there wouldn't be a retirement for me in the business. There's no pension plan. So that was part of the process for me in understanding I had to be in control of my own destiny.

Can you tell us a little bit about your book? How long was that journey?

That was three years and 24 edits. And it's finally finished. But it was, as I said, when the accident happened, that was transformational for me. So my story really started to evolve from that point. A couple of years after, as I'm recovering, I'm thinking it out loud and I'm putting it on paper. And that's when I decided, "I want to do a book."

Once I started to see it and understand it, understood what this was going to become, the process became easier. It's built on principles: intuition, mastery, pivot, authenticity, connection and teamwork. So it's everything of who I am and what I've been. It was easy to do at that point.

As the CEO of DVERSE Media, what qualities do you look for in an executive?

Integrity's definitely top of the list. I'd rather work with a "C-plus," honest, loyal executive and train them and work with them than with a cut-throat "A" player. Because I'll compensate for that. And we'll figure it out along the way. Because what's most important in this thing we call work is who you're in the foxhole with. You need people who are going to really go the distance with you—you can't always play the perfect game. You're going to make mistakes. Hey, pull your coattail—as opposed to exposing you—and say, "You see what they're doin', right?" And that's really important for me.

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You've watched the music business evolve.

Where does it stand today?

It's a great place for music on both ends. From a corporate standpoint, there are record profits. The music business has never made the amount of revenue that it has recently. And the artist has never had the freedom to actually come to the marketplace as they have in current day.

Before, the labels were the gatekeepers. Now, if you decide that you want to be an artist and you want to put your music out, there's nothing standing in the middle. So it gives the freedom for the artist now to corral their own niche and their own audience.

You as a consumer, you can pick and choose what your taste and your appetite are. And now it's all structured for you to be able to go to a playlist and live in that space that you want, that you can listen to your kind of music forever.

But now on another note of that question, R&B's coming back so I'm excited.

What's the next project for you?

I have a young artist who I released five weeks ago. Her name is Paris Gatlin. She's from Jackson, Mississippi. She's probably a mashup between Amy Winehouse meets a little bit of Adele meets a little bit of just, like, sassy frassy. She's incredible. She has a big future ahead. So super excited about that.

What advice would you give a 21-year-old Benny?

I would say, "Allow yourself the opportunity to live a wholesome, fluid life." Life is fragile. It changes that fast. You don't want to be in that moment going, "I coulda, woulda, shoulda."

Thanks for coming and sharing your wisdom with us.

Thank you! At Brunswick Group, you're giving people opportunities that they might not get otherwise. And that may spark more people, or even for just one person in the organization who might either ascend and become the next chairman or chairwoman, or go on and become great or even just be where they are and be able to impact positivity and change. That's what you guys have done, and I applaud you for it. ♦

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ANTHONY APPLEWHAITE is a Partner and **ERIKA BELL** is an Executive with Brunswick. Both are based in the firm's Washington, DC office and are founding members of the firm's employee resource group Black Employees and Allies Together (BEAT).