

Curb's enthusiasm



AS WELL AS OWNING ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL INDEPENDENT RECORD LABELS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MUSIC BUSINESS, MIKE CURB IS AN ARTIST, PRODUCER, SONGWRITER, AND PHILANTHROPIST WITH A PASSION FOR MOTORSPORTS. HE STARTED HIS FIRST LABEL IN 1964 AND IN 2001 CURB RECORDS WAS NAMED THE COUNTRY MUSIC LABEL OF THE YEAR. HE SPEAKS TO DUNCAN WARWICK.

It's gotten mighty hard to compete with the major labels these days. Mergers and takeovers have tried their hardest to put the squeeze on the little guy and allow the big three to control the market. Many historic labels exist only as marketing exercise under the corporate umbrella, and while small labels will sometimes manage to get a foothold, any sniff of success, and a takeover is likely, especially if they have a hit artist on their roster. Still hanging in there after many decades, though, is Curb Records. Like a thorn in the side of the majors, the label, helmed by Mike Curb who remains Chairman of the Board, has been giving the majors a run for their money in Nashville for years. They broke LeAnn Rimes, Tim McGraw, Hal Ketchum and Jo Dee Messina.

Hank Williams Jr., The Bellamy Brothers, and The Judds rank as some of their most successful artists. In Europe the label has had pop success with The Osmonds and the LeAnn Rimes smash from Coyote Ugly, *Can't Fight The Moonlight*.

Distribution deals with the majors may come and go, but the label, which was started by Mike Curb as a college drop-out in California in 1963 as Sidewalk Records, has been punching above its weight ever since. Currently Curb has Lee Brice riding high in the country charts.

It could be argued that it was Mike Curb who gave Linda Ronstadt her first break when he signed her group The Stone Poneys back in 1960s LA. But it was a song he'd written as a

college freshman, *You Meet The Nicest People On A Honda (Go Little Honda)* that gave him his start when it was picked up by the Japanese giant company for an ad campaign.

In 1969 Curb merged with MGM Records with Mike Curb serving as President of that as well as respected jazz label Verve. Huge successes for the label include the Sammy Davis Jr. hit *The Candy Man*, which Mike Curb and his Congregation had originally released with little success, and the Four Seasons' 'comeback' hit December 1963 (*Oh, What A Night*), but Mike Curb's country connections go way back. He wrote Hank Jr.'s first number one (*All For The Love Of Sunshine*), with The Mike Curb Congregation he was a regular on the Glen Campbell TV show, and as well as signing artists like Sawyer Brown, Junior Brown, Mo Pitney, and Boy Howdy to the label he entered politics as the 42nd Lieutenant Governor of California (1979-1983), and his induction to the West Coast Stock Car Hall Of Fame hints at his NASCAR associations as a team owner.

The clean living Mike Curb has been able to save some historic Nashville buildings such as RCA Studio B which he owns, and is a benefactor of Nashville Universities (as well as endowments to numerous other colleges). He even owns a Memphis house once owned by Elvis, and in 2014 was inducted into the Musicians Hall of Fame and Museum.

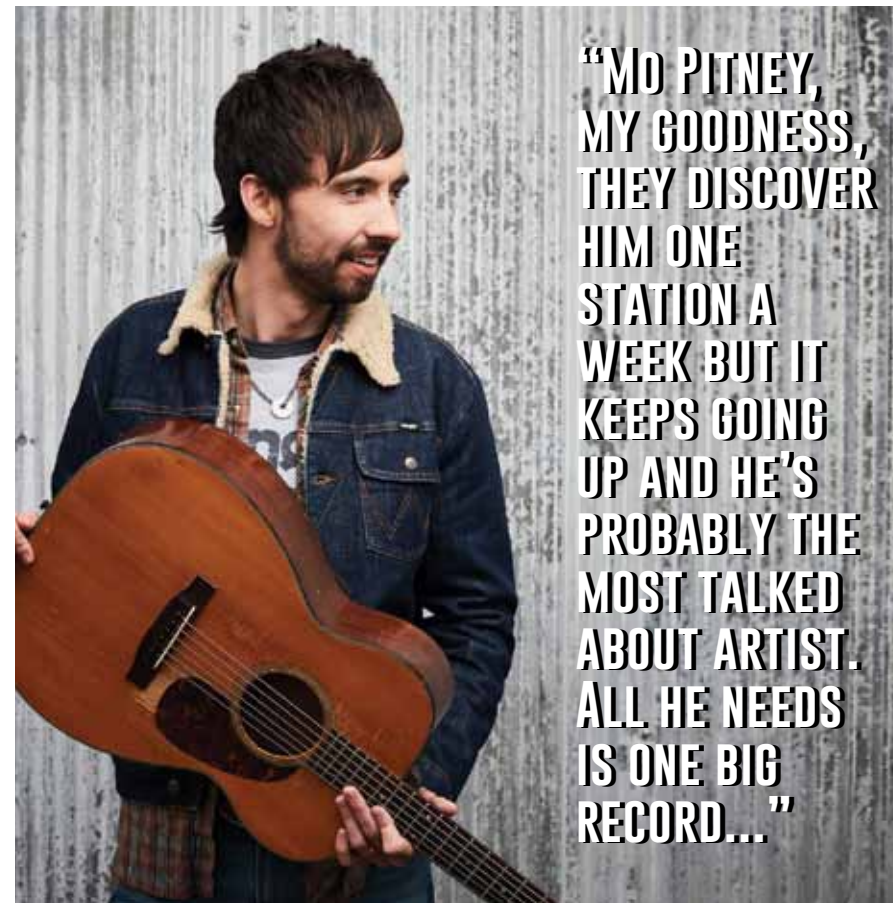
It's quite some resumé, but despite his successes, Mike Curb

remains charming and modest, thoughtful and caring even, as he takes time from his early morning look at revenue projections to talk on the phone (looking at revenue projections to start the day is how he jokes is one of the ways the industry has changed in recent years). But while we're about it, he does share the lowdown on the state of business mid-pandemic. "It's a funny thing, we're actually having a good year. We didn't know what to expect at the start of the year. We didn't know what our government was going to close. The government obviously picks winners and losers. They closed a lot of businesses and a lot of businesses were closed, and obviously they closed our offices in Nashville and in Los Angeles, but they didn't close down the will of our people. We have 152 employees, artists, and songwriters and we made a decision in March when Covid-19 hit that we were going to keep everyone safe and make sure everyone had their salaries, their medical, their 401ks, and so far it's been six months and everyone's safe.

"We got a little bit lucky and we had the hottest record, in America anyway — *One Of Them Girls* by Lee Brice. It's number two on Billboard this week already. Dylan Scott's record just went into the Top 40 of Billboard and then Mo Pitney, my goodness, they discover him one station a week but it keeps going up and he's probably the most talked about artist. All he needs is one big record and we're hoping we've got it here. It's not on the official chart yet but he has a number on the Airplay [chart]."

When it comes to the record business becoming more corporate, Mike Curb says, "We're hoping that the majors allow us to keep existing. The thing that's so interesting is that the majors have pretty much eliminated the compilation business. For years we used to put fabulous compilations together that were very exciting. You'd put a compilation together and you'd have one artist, let's say that was on Motown, you'd put an artist from Chess Records, you'd put an artist from ABC Records, you name it. You'd put one artist from each and you'd have a wonderful compilation. Now all those labels are owned by Universal so they don't need you to do a compilation; they can do it themselves, and of course with streaming the consumer can actually do it themselves. The compilation business that was so huge for us back in the day of the CD has disappeared.

"One of the reasons that my wife and I moved to Nashville almost thirty years ago was that we saw this happening and we saw what was going on with Universal, Sony and Warner. The buying of all these companies and the merging and back then it was Polygram and BMG also. BMG have started to come back but they initially merged with Sony all those



MIKE CURB



years ago. So we saw all of this happening and thought we'd better get to Nashville and make sure we can have some more runs because we loved the big runs that we had.

"Fifty years ago is back when I had *Burning Bridges* from the Kelly's Heroes movie with the Mike Curb Congregation and my first number one song with Hank Williams Jr. I mean, that was fifty years ago that we got involved with Hank Williams Jr., and then for forty years he stayed with our company and we had over a hundred chart records with Hank Jr. It all started with a song I co-wrote fifty years ago and it was in the same movie, Kelly's Heroes, the Clint Eastwood movie, as *Burning Bridges* which was the theme song."

One of the qualities that seems almost unique to Curb Records is the way they stick by an artist and keep them on their roster, even if the hits aren't coming quite as they, or the artist, might like. More reminiscent of the old days when a label would 'grow' an artist, the commitment is a far cry from the 'send a single out to radio and if it ain't hit we'll drop 'em' mentality adopted by many today. Steve Holy went five years between chart-toppers (*Good Morning Beautiful* and *Brand New Girlfriend*), and Mo Pitney is on to album number two despite the lack of chart action.

"We've been with Mo for seven years now and he just keeps evolving. Yes, we had so many years with Steve Holy and all of a sudden the fourth single on his album... It was so amazing back then right at the beginning of this century. They were looking for a song for a Jennifer Lopez movie and I had co-written the title song for the film, but they were looking for a country crossover song for a scene in the movie and I played *Good Morning Beautiful* for them. We had already released three singles that hadn't really hit and then we put that out and all of a sudden it exploded and it went to number one.

"It was amazing because we had a couple of other artists, Jo Dee Messina and Tim McGraw, at the time whose records were heading to number one and *Good Morning Beautiful* just stayed there and blocked even our own records. It was number one for five or six weeks on Billboard. But you're right, we stayed with him and we did the same with Rodney [Atkins]. We stayed with Rodney for almost fifteen years until he had his first big hit *Going Through Hell* and the same with Tim McGraw. Tim McGraw was on our label for six or seven years and we even had a whole album where we didn't have a hit and then finally we did his second album after all those years and there was a song called *Indian Outlaw* and then *Don't Take The Girl, Down On The Farm*, and then *Not A Moment Too Soon*. We've had that experience over and over where we stay with an artist.

"Look at Tim Duggar. We've been working with Tim Duggar for ten years and he's so, so good and he's country. I love the United Kingdom: the way they stay with artists and stay with legendary artists. I remember when I signed the Osmond family, oh my goodness, fifty years ago, and I came over to England. I was the producer and I had produced *Puppy Love* by Donny Osmond and to this day the Osmonds do work in England. I was talking to Merrill Osmond, who was the lead singer of the group who did

From top: The Mike Curb Congregation and Davy Jones of Monkees fame.

Hank Williams Jr. receiving sales recognition with Mike Curb and Buddy Lee.

Mike Curb presents the Osmonds with a gold disc for *One Bad Apple*.

Jimmy Bowen, Hank Jr. and Mike Curb.

Some Curb Records successes: Hal Ketchum (below).

Tim McGraw (right) in his early days with the label. The cassette inlay for LeAnn Rimes' debut, and the first album from Jo Dee Messina which was co-produced by Tim McGraw and Byron Gallimore and included her first hit *Heads Carolina, Tails California* (#2 - 1996), and The Judds.





Currently riding high for the label, Lee Brice.

One Bad Apple, *Down By The Lazy River*, and *Love Me For A Reason*, he's going back to England, even though the group has had to disband, and here's Merrill coming back after all these years. I just have to say I love England because they don't forget. They don't forget the artists.

"It's so funny, I was over there with LeAnn Rimes in 1997 or '98 and we had *How Do I Live* which was a really big hit at that time. We hadn't done *Coyote Ugly* yet, but *How Do I Live* was a big hit on our label over there. I did an interview with a magazine over there about LeAnn Rimes *How Do I Live* and they said, 'Tomorrow your dad is going to be here'. And I said, 'Well my dad is dead. He could be here. I hope he could'. But they said, 'No, your dad is coming in tomorrow'. I said, 'What is he doing?' He said, 'He's going to do an interview about all the years that he was discovering and producing the Osmonds' and I said, 'No, that's me'"

The sheer success of so many releases on Curb Records over the years - the hits - is why the company has thrived, and in his autobiography, *Living The Business*, Mike Curb states 'I believe a label that only does country and Christian music may fail unless they get lucky'. However, even he agrees that crossover is more beneficial when it happens naturally, rather than chasing it at all costs. "Sometimes the most successful crossover records have been the ones that are the most country," opines Curb.

"The reason for that is that it's really about public acceptance and I don't know if the average person makes a huge distinction between pop and country. Take Elvis Presley, he recorded 300 songs at RCA Studio B and of course prior to that he was with Sun, but he used the exact same musicians on his records when he recorded in Nashville in the 60s that Eddy Arnold was using. And over the years country accepted him. In fact, later in his life his albums were on the country chart.

"Take Keith Urban, he's my next door neighbour, when I first heard him when he was in his band he sounded like a pop/rock artist and when you listen to Keith's interpretations of a song he's very, very pop yet very accepted by country. I think you're always going to have some artists that lean pop and you're going to have some artists like Luke Combs and Tim Dugger that lean country and I think it's always going to be that way.

"When I started my company in 1964, that's fifty-six years ago," he says, "in those days in the major cities we didn't have a country music station. So in those days on Top 40 radio you could hear the Beatles, 1964, my goodness, that's about all you heard, but along the way you could hear *El Paso* by Marty Robbins or you could hear *Last Date* by Floyd Cramer or you could hear Jim Reeves singing *He'll Have To Go*, or you could hear a Motown record like the Four Tops or Diana Ross and The Supremes. You could hear a



RCA's historic Studio B which, following the purchase by the Mike Curb Family Foundation, is leased in perpetuity to the non-profit Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. The studio's exterior has been renovated and the interior has been returned to its 1970s-era prime as an analog "temple of sound."

Stax record, you could hear Sam & Dave, Otis Redding. You could hear all these great artists and then you could hear a country record being played at the same time, on the same station. It was Top 40 radio and it was that way for years.

"Then, of course, as time went on and the major cities in America had their own country music station... And now, of course, you have the situation where the same owners own the station so it works better for their advertising to have the country artists on one station, the pop artists on one station, the RnB artists on one station... There are so many divisions but I would say that once again what I love about the United Kingdom is that I feel like people like all kinds of music there. London felt to me like Music City, USA does in Nashville. That's why we moved to Nashville. Everybody knows about Elton John and everybody reveres Elton John and knows what he's going through individually and what he's overcome and the incredible music. They know David Bowie as an institution, but at the same time new artists emerge and that's the way it is in Nashville. Yes, the crossover... Lee Brice, for example, this past year *Rumor* was a very big number one record and we crossed it over to pop with just a slightly different mix and it really worked. Whether it's a Christian artist or whether it's a country artist, if we cross them we get a much greater audience. Look what happened over the years when a country record became a pop hit, if you go back, let's say, to the early 60s, Eddy Arnold did *Make The World Go Away*. He recorded for us for so many years. That record was on RCA at the time but he did a re-record for us when he did his retrospective album, but the original was an RCA record, and just think about that record which was a big, big hit in England and it was a hit on the pop chart even though it was a country record. Of course he recorded most of his hits at RCA Studio B, some at RCA Studio A, but RCA Studio B is one of the studios that we've renovated. *Make The World Go Away* was recorded in A because of the strings but RCA Studio B was where he recorded a lot of the other big country hits that he had."

With Curb Records nearing 400 number one records (across all genres) and business interests that extend to music publishing, charitable programs, motorsports, and politics, there isn't much that Mike Curb hasn't achieved. The one thing he hasn't had time for he says with a laugh, "I'd like a vacation." He deserves one. 