

billboard Country Update

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BILLBOARD COUNTRY UPDATE

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Mike Curb's Belmont Partnership: Investing In Nashville's Future Music Business



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The anniversaries are piling up on Curb | Word Entertainment chairman **Mike Curb**.

This year is the 60th anniversary of Curb Records' founding. April 29 marked 30 years since Belmont University announced its highest-profile program was being renamed the Mike Curb College of Entertainment & Music Business. And the school just wrapped the 50th-anniversary campaign that celebrated the department's founding. All those milestones come as Curb approaches his 80th birthday on Christmas Eve.

"I like everything except the last statistic," he deadpans near the start of a three-hour interview.

The conversation acknowledges the landmarks, but it comes, more importantly, as Curb's latest investment wraps some of his deepest passions — education, music preservation and legacy — in a structure likely to enhance the relationship between Belmont and Music Row. Belmont announced April 9 that the Curb Foundation made a \$58 million donation that will seed a multipurpose

Curb College building on Music Circle South, wedged between the BMG offices and the historic Columbia Studios.

Neither Curb nor Belmont president **Greg Jones** could specify the breakdown of the \$58 million — both called it "complicated" — but the figure encompasses the value

of the land, which Curb donated; future rent; and cash. It also includes an expansion of the Buddy Lee Attractions building that's adjacent to Columbia, while the school attempts to raise an additional \$40 million for the project, which will encourage interplay between Belmont students and working music professionals. A 150-capacity performance space will provide an ideal

concert-audio learning facility and offer label showcase options. Songwriting rooms will serve the college and, perhaps, some independent writers. And a coffee shop is expected to lure lunchtime visits from nearby businesses, setting up the possibility for students that a springboard for their careers could be just a handshake away.



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The building is in the works at a time when large chunks of Music Row have been overtaken by non-music developers. Curb owns 12 properties on the Row — including RCA Studio B, Ocean Way and the former Masterfonics building — and he's doggedly determined to maintain the character of the neighborhood, where he has control. That's particularly true on Music Circle South, a block with numerous studios that have yielded hits by **Johnny Cash**, **Bob Dylan**, **George Strait**, **Tom T. Hall** and **Dan + Shay** — just for starters — through the decades.

"We made it impossible for the developers to get to it," Curb says. "Even the **WNAH** radio building is just the way it is. Even the buildings that we're using for Curb Records or for Word Records. Those are staying exactly the way they are. So we've got it pretty locked."

Curb established his label as an 18-year-old college student at Cal State Northridge who was too young to sign the startup papers without a co-signer. He made a deal with Capitol, wrote a Honda commercial and landed a bundle of songs on movie soundtracks, including the 1968 **Clint Eastwood** picture *Kelly's Heroes*. Curb became the president of MGM in his 20s, working with **The Osmonds**, **Lou Rawls**, **Sammy Davis Jr.** and **Hank Williams Jr.**, and by the end of the '70s, he was California lieutenant governor, serving alongside **Ronald Reagan**.

Post-government, he extended the Curb label's independent run by partnering with the majors in the careers of Williams, **The Judds**, **T.G. Sheppard**, **Lyle Lovett** and **Debby Boone**, among others.

"Back then, you could walk up and down Hollywood Boulevard or Sunset Boulevard, there were hundreds of independents," he remembers. "Now they're all owned by the three majors. That's one of the big issues now, you know: The deep catalog of our industry is owned and controlled by three majors."

Curb arrived in Nashville in the early 1990s, earning multiplatinum sales from **Tim McGraw** and **LeAnn Rimes** along with hits by **Sawyer Brown**, **Hal Ketchum**, **Jo Dee Messina** and, in the 2000s, **Rodney Atkins**. McGraw and Rimes had public spats involving their Curb deals, and Curb ended up in litigation with Big Machine Label Group over McGraw, who ultimately moved on. Despite that battle, Curb is on good terms with BMLG president/CEO **Scott Borchetta**, who has partnered with him in auto racing.

"I consider Mike a genius, I consider him a friend, I consider him misunderstood by a lot of people," Borchetta says. "The guy's a walking encyclopedia."

Curb's ability to maintain relationships, even amid sharp disagreements, is a skill he perfected during his political career. His relationship with Belmont, for example, continues despite his previous opposition to the university's firing of a lesbian coach. (The school ultimately amended its policies.) In 1978, Curb helped defeat a California proposition that would have banned gay teachers from schools, convincing conservative icon Reagan to join the battle. Currently, he continues to speak highly of Sen. **Marsha Blackburn** (R-Tenn.), who agreed to a meeting with his gay employees, though they were unable to change her position on key issues. Writing people off, he reasons, is a poor long-term strategy.

"What I always tried to do was not criticize the people who disagreed with me, but tried to bring them together," he says. "As I learned from Ronald Reagan, you just need 51%."

Curb has certainly won over Belmont's Jones. He suggested doing something with the Music Circle South property to benefit the music business program shortly after Jones became university president in 2021. The school already had an ideal location at the Southern edge of Music Row. With the new building, it will be in the heart of the district.

"We weren't just thinking of the present and then making incremental changes," says Jones. "We wanted the next 50 years of music business to be really transformational."

It's a goal that Curb shares. His label's 60th anniversary will be celebrated June 6 with a CMA Fest show at Nashville's Ascend Amphitheater featuring Atkins, Sawyer Brown, **Dylan Scott**, **Hannah Ellis**, **Kelsey Hart** and **Lee Brice**, among others. Curb is excited over the prospects of Brice's new single — "Drinkin' Buddies," featuring **Nate Smith** and **Hailey Whitters** — which debuts at No. 26 on the Country Airplay chart dated May 11 (see page 4). But he's just as enthusiastic about Brice's collaboration with Christian band **for King & Country** on "Checking In," which could — like Curb's efforts for Belmont and for marriage equality — make a lasting mark. The anniversaries are important, but the future still beckons.

"We're impacting the culture of Nashville, of country music — maybe pop music, the culture of the nation," he says with youthful enthusiasm. "That's what's so exciting about what we do." ●



Charley Crockett (center) was among the artists who attended a CAA Stagecoach Brunch on April 27 during the Stagecoach Country Music Festival in Indio, Calif. With him: CAA senior music agent Brian Greenbaum (left) and head of music Rob Light.



Kenny Chesney welcomed unannounced guest Kelsea Ballerini for three songs during his April 27 date at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, N.C.



Miranda Lambert (left) brought surprise guest Reba McEntire out for a three-song encore when she headlined the Stagecoach Music Festival on April 27 in Indio, Calif.

Corey Kent dropped by WWKA Orlando, Fla., on April 30. From left: WWKA music director Melissa Quinones, Sony Music Nashville national promotion and artist development specialist Nicole Walden, Kent and Cox Music Group/Orlando director of operations Steve Stewart.