

{ MIKE CURB : 50 Years }

MIKE CURB: 50 YEAR MUSIC LEGACY

A HALF CENTURY OF INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN RECORDING INDUSTRY

It was a love affair with the 45 record that would shape the life of one of the most dynamic record company executives in the history of the business.

The son of an FBI agent, Mike Curb and his family moved with his father's assignments. Mike was born on Christmas Eve, 1944 in Savannah, Georgia, but had lived in Charleston, South Carolina, Oklahoma City and Prescott, Arizona by the time he was four.

Among his earliest memories is sitting at the church organ with his grandfather, learning how to play the hymn "Just As I Am."

Mike started kindergarten in Southern California in 1949 – the same year the 45 was introduced – in the racially mixed, inner-city neighborhood of Compton. He started violin lessons that year, and was learning on an upright piano.

Local radio stations were playing the new "doo-wop" sound, and 45s were popping up featuring the early rhythm and blues. Soulful street-corner bands serenaded him as he walked home from school. That sound – the foundation of popular music in America for the next 50 years – had touched his heart.



Mike Curb at age 4 in Compton, California, playing his violin.

At home, he practiced hymns from church on the piano, but with an R&B rhythm.

"I was taking lessons and the piano teacher would give me a song to play," Mike says. "And I would play it, but I would be playing it with a doo wop beat with my left hand. She asked where I had heard that, and I told her there was this radio station in town that played these songs every night at six."

The music coming from African-American churches had caught his ear too, and he would attend services with black friends when his father was traveling. Those years in Compton were the foundation of Mike Curb's musical worldview.

The family moved to the San Fernando Valley when Mike was nine, and the culture was different – the sound was different. It was a big transition to new friends and new radio stations, where nobody was playing R&B records.

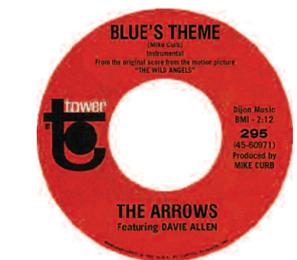
But along came Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, Ricky Nelson and



"Apache 65" by The Arrows – Curb's first Billboard chart record



"So Fine" by the Stone Poneys – Curb-produced first single featuring Linda Ronstadt



"Blues Theme" – Curb-composed hit song from the motion picture Wild Angels



"Hot Dawg" by Mike Curb and The Curbstones – first single by new artist on then newly-merged Warner/Reprise label in 1964

the roots of rock n' roll, taking a new twist on the African-American sounds and introducing them to mainstream America. Television shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Hit Parade* and *American Bandstand* were bringing those artists into living rooms all over the country. It was the golden age of R&B.

"I remember liking Elvis Presley and I remember that I was in love with 45 records – that's all I lived for," Mike says of his grade-school days in the San Fernando Valley. "I ran two paper routes just to get money to buy 45s, and I still have those records today."

He formed a band with his junior-high friends, playing venues like the family garage and school dances. The small combo – guitar, drums, maybe a saxophone player and Mike on the piano or organ – was the early years of The Mike Curb Congregation.

Soon, it was clear that he had an uncommon talent for all things musical – he had the unique ability to write, perform and appreciate a wide variety of musical styles. He had a folk group, a rock n' roll band, and a gospel group through the years, most featuring at least one original member of the Congregation.

Shortly after graduating from high school, Mike talked his father into allowing him to borrow the family car and drive to Waco, Texas, to pitch his pop/country/gospel version of "I Saw the Light" to Word Records, the leading label for gospel music. The Mike Curb Congregation album containing the song "I

Saw The Light" was later released by Word Records, and it started a relationship between Mike Curb and Word Records that culminated in Mike's service as chairman of the board of that label decades later.

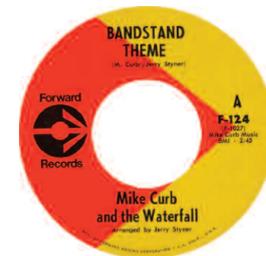
In between courses at San Fernando Valley College and his job at the White Front record store, he walked the streets of Hollywood, stopping in to the small, independent labels and shopping his music. The Music Hall on campus offered access to instruments, rehearsal space and recording equipment, and his bands, under various names, released singles through several labels – on Marc Records as The Warriors, American Artists as The Sudells, Dore Records as The Zanies, and Dot Records as the Streamers, to name a few. The songs were playing locally on the radio, and the band was playing fraternity houses on the weekends.

A chance meeting with Bobby Darin in the elevator of the Capitol Tower ended with a publishing contract, and it wasn't long before he had a hit single – with another group doing the performing.

Through that experience, Mike Curb realized that his passion was for the business of making music. He was respected as a songwriter and a performer, but pulling the pieces together to create an album for the masses was where he would make his mark. He was a record producer.



"Go Little Honda" by the Hondells - Curb-composed song from the hit Honda commercial



"American Bandstand Theme" by Mike Curb and the Waterfall - Curb-composed theme for Dick Clark's American Bandstand



"Burning Bridges" by The Mike Curb Congregation - Curb-composed worldwide hit single from Clint Eastwood's film Kelly's Heroes



"It's A Small World" by The Mike Curb Congregation - Curb-produced hit single from Walt Disney's Disneyland Park



"Puppy Love" - Curb-produced recording of Donny Osmond's biggest worldwide hit



"I'm Leaving It All Up To You" - Curb-produced recording of Donny & Marie's first #1 record



"You Light Up My Life" by Debby Boone - Billboard's #1 recording of the entire decade of the 1970s



"December 1963 (Oh, What A Night)" by The Four Seasons - first recording to achieve more than one year on the Billboard chart

The surfer sounds and songs about hot rods and motorcycles offered a niche in soundtracks for television and movies. Soon, Mike was writing original music for everything from Saturday morning cartoons to major films and car commercials, and releasing the songs on vinyl.

While the work was increasing, he learned that the record business is not always an easy one. He lived in his office on Sunset

Strip for a time because he couldn't afford to rent an apartment, too. It was important enough to him and his two employees to keep the office open that he was willing to live in what amounted to janitor's quarters.

A cross-country flight found him sitting next to Dick Clark, which led to Mike writing a new theme song for *American Bandstand*, which was played weekly on the hugely popular

show. Then it was *The Glen Campbell Show*, where The Mike Curb Congregation played every week.

"Those early days were a struggle, but they were exciting," Mike remembers. "I did not mind waiting an hour for a meeting because I wanted to write and record songs and I didn't care whether I was an artist, songwriter, producer, publisher or record company owner. I just wanted to be in the record business and make those 45 rpm records."

The film soundtracks became an important part of Curb's career and helped launch what would become the Curb label. They also introduced future stars like Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Nancy Sinatra and John Cassavetes to film audiences. Taking rock n' roll to film was a new concept, but it was becoming profitable.

Through his mentor, Eddie Ray, he was able to secure a distribution agreement with Capitol Records for his Sidewalk label that he started as a teenager. That arrangement launched the careers of Curb's own band The Arrows, along with The Stone Poneys with Linda

Ronstadt, Electric Flag and others.

At the age of 24, he merged his company with MGM Records and became the youngest president of a major label. He had already signed The Osmonds and formed a relationship that would bring many years of success in working with that family.



Mike with The Osmond Brothers (Alan, Wayne, Jay, Donny and Merrill), celebrating their first number one recording, "One Bad Apple."

"I'm Leaving it All Up To You" was a hit for Donny and Marie in 1974, but it wasn't planned that way. Donny's voice had changed over the years, and he could no longer hit the high notes of the harmony. Marie was in the studio and Mike asked her to sing it, and by the time they'd finished everyone agreed they should release the song as Donny and Marie. A string of hits that Mike produced followed.

In many ways, the early '70s was an illustration of the diversity of Mike Curb, and the way in which working in different genres allowed him to be successful through the constantly changing musical preferences of popular culture. Number-one records came from the Curb-composed theme song to the Clint Eastwood movie *Kelly's Heroes*, with Eric Burdon



The Mike Curb Congregation at the announcement that the group would be performing weekly on The Glen Campbell Show on the CBS television network



"Candy Man" – Curb-produced #1 recording by Sammy Davis Jr. and The Mike Curb Congregation



"Natural Man" - the first Grammy for Lou Rawls with The Mike Curb Congregation



"It Was A Good Time" - Curb-composed song from Liza Minnelli's Emmy award-winning Liza With A Z



"So Young" - Curb-composed song from Roy Orbison's first soundtrack



"Grandpa" - #1 single by The Judds

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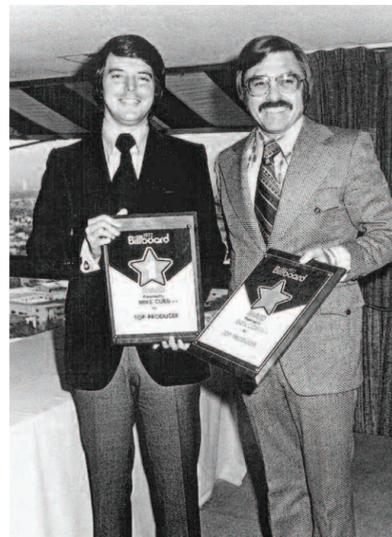
Mike with Naomi and Wynonna Judd



"No One Else On Earth" - #1 single by Wynonna Judd



Sammy Davis Jr. with The Mike Curb Congregation performing their number-one song "Candy Man" in Miami, where President Nixon surprised them by coming on stage and telling Sammy and Mike that it was his favorite song



Gary Owens, star of the Laugh In TV show, presenting Mike Curb with the 1972 Billboard "Producer of the Year" award

and WAR, with Hank Williams Jr. singing a Curb-written song and producing Sammy Davis Jr. with "The Candy Man." All had crossover appeal, and were breaking down traditional radio barriers.

Sammy Davis Jr. didn't want to sing "Candy Man," but Mike convinced him to do it. He was only able to get two takes out of Sammy, but he got it done. The song went number one and was nominated for a Grammy and became an icon of the era and the signature song of Sammy Davis Jr. "Candy Man" did not win the

Grammy, however, Lou Rawls — another Curb artist — won a Grammy with "Natural Man," with The Mike Curb Congregation singing backup.

Curb's relationship with Hank Williams Jr. has covered 40 years and more than 100 *Billboard* charted records, and it all started between shows at the Landmark Hotel in Las Vegas. Hank had made a name for himself singing his father's songs, but it was clear he wanted to branch out. The Congregation was opening for Hank in

Vegas, and Mike found Hank playing R&B songs on the piano during intermission.

"I said to Hank, 'Let's do rock n' roll – you're Hank Williams Jr. and you can do whatever you want!,'" Mike says. "I was not the right person to do a country song with Hank Jr., but I knew I could do rock n' roll with him and I wanted to help bring rock to country music."

"We recorded 'Ain't That A Shame,' and there weren't too many people who thought that was going to be a big hit. Maybe if I had lived in Nashville my whole life, I would have told Hank not to do an R&B song. However, doing songs that are not supposed to be done in music, and doing things that nobody else is doing can lead to success." On that same recording session, Hank Jr. recorded a song that Curb co-wrote with his first employee Harley Hatcher. That song, "All For The Love Of Sunshine," became Hank Williams Jr.'s first number one record.

Hank Williams Jr. fell off a mountainside in Montana in 1975, and it took nine surgeries over two years to rebuild his shattered face. Many believed he wouldn't live through it, much

less be able to record and perform again. However, Mike believed in Hank, and he signed him to Curb Records. After selling more than 40 million records together, the rest is history.

Oftentimes, it's a chance meeting or a loose connection that allows the stars to align in a way that creates magic. Naomi Judd was working as a nurse in 1983 at a hospital in Franklin, Tennessee. The daughter of a well-known producer was her patient, and Naomi passed along a tape to Curb's longtime friend and president Dick Whitehouse. It ended with Mike Curb, and a last-minute cancellation at a charity event in New York City that gave them an opportunity to perform live. Over the course of the next three decades, The Judds – and later, Wynonna – put out hit after hit and secured their place in the history of country music.

Through the 1980s, Curb Records continued to find success in the movie soundtrack genre, and in pop, rock, gospel, country, even rap. Again, Mike found a way to deliver crossover appeal to the masses.

"Lyle Lovett was an artist that nobody in Nashville wanted to sign, but Dick Whitehouse brought him to our label," Curb says. "My only question was, is he rock? Is he pop? Is he coun-



"Live Like You Were Dying" – 10 week #1 single and Grammy award-winning song by Tim McGraw



"Some Girls Do" – #1 record by Sawyer Brown



"How Do I Live" – Curb co-produced single by LeAnn Rimes which was the longest running record on the Billboard chart's 50th anniversary



"She's No Lady" – hit single by Grammy award winner Lyle Lovett

try? Is he blues? After 25 years, I still don't know. Lyle has won four Grammy awards, but until he delivers an album it is impossible to know whether it is a blues album or a country project. He is the kind of artist that makes me proud to be in the record business."

Tim McGraw was a young artist that Curb signed in the early '90s to compete with the George Straits and Garth Brooks of the country world. The early McGraw singles didn't find commercial success, but the 1993 Fan Fair in Nashville was a turning point. Boy Howdy had a big hit with Curb and was set to perform, but a car accident that day had left their drummer very badly hurt. Tim and his band were asked to fill in, and the crowd reacted very positively to the song "Indian Outlaw," which Mike had not heard.

After the show, Mike visited with Tim on his converted schoolbus, and despite the success of the live show, Tim was frustrated that record people had rejected "Indian Outlaw," but Mike assured him that they would release it and the song became a Top 10 hit that launched the career of Tim McGraw.

That ability to recognize a talent and a song that will sell has been the hallmark of Mike Curb's career. Every day, he



Tim McGraw and Mike Curb

receives a package of demo tapes to review. One weekend, Mike was taking his wife and two teenage daughters to the Smoky Mountains for a vacation.

"I told my daughters that I had a tape from a girl their age who had sung the national anthem at a Dallas Cowboys football game, and that everyone thought she was great," Mike remembers. "I put on the LeAnn Rimes recording and the very first song was 'Blue,' and they loved it."

Before the weekend was over, Mike had talked with LeAnn's father and arranged a meeting that led to blockbuster success across the country, pop and gospel charts.



Recording artists David Kersh and LeAnn Rimes, Mike Curb and Mark Miller of the band Sawyer Brown



Hank Williams Jr. and Mike Curb both achieved their first #1 record together with a song recorded in 1969 entitled "All For The Love Of Sunshine" which was co-written and co-produced by Curb.

These are the stories of Mike Curb's career. Through the course of 50 years in the recording industry, Mike Curb and Curb Records has indeed secured a place in the history of American music. Along the way, he has produced, written and released records with nearly every major label in the business and cultivated the careers of dozens of international superstars, including recent major #1 records by Natalie Grant and Lee Brice.

Curb Records has produced more than 300 number-one songs on the *Billboard* charts and is among the top labels of all time, based on chart activity. It is the oldest privately held and independently owned label that is still owned and operated today by its founder.

The following 50-year discography simply hits the highlights of half a century of chart-busting success – the life's work of a kindergartner who fell in love with 45s only to become one of the most successful record company executives in the history of recorded music.

Dick Whitehouse, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s son Dexter King and Eddie Ray join Mike as he is honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



In 2013/2014 Natalie Grant and Lee Brice made it possible for Curb to achieve its 300th #1 record with Natalie's "Hurricane" and Lee's CMA/AGM award-winning song "I Drive Your Truck". Both artists received multiple Grammy nominations in 2014.

