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Curb's generosity nurtures music's next generations

*Philanthropy underwrites schools' programs, preserves historic sites*By RYAN UNDERWOOD
Staff Writer

For someone who dropped out of college as a freshman after hitting it big with his 1963 jingle, "You Meet The Nicest People on a Honda," Nashville music mogul Mike Curb has spent the past several years making up for lost time.

In October, Memphis' Rhodes College announced it would establish the Mike Curb Institute for Music after receiving a \$5 million donation.

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And earlier this month, Curb, 61, attended the dedication of the Mike Curb College of Arts, Media, and Communication at his alma mater, California State University, Northridge, after giving a gift of \$10 million.

Those donations come on top of what he's given in recent years to help establish Belmont University's Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business, the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University and the

Curb/Beaman Jubilee Singers Chair at Fisk.

"There really was not very much music business education available when I went to school. There was none. And I always felt badly about it," Curb said over lunch when asked if there was a particular impetus that led him to educational causes.

All told, Curb estimates — reluctantly — that his family's philanthropic organization has spent close to \$50 million on various endowments and charities since it was founded in 1997.

At Belmont, President Bob Fisher is quick to credit Curb with changing the university's entire outlook on ambitions.

"He changed everything," he said. "He changed the value of Belmont. He changed the way we think. Now, when we start talking to people, we think big."

Giving money away, it seems, has become one of Curb's latest areas of interest in an already storied career, which has rambled through songwriting, record producing and even politics. (He was elected lieutenant governor of California in 1978.)

"Instead of trying to see how much money you can put together in your life, it's more fun to figure out how much you can give away," Curb said, suggesting at one point that he and his wife, Linda, hope to bequeath at least double the amount they've given. "We can't take our money with us. We can't put it in our coffins."

Preserving historic sites

Curb has also donated significant amounts to the Nashville Symphony, the public library in downtown Nashville and the Vanderbilt children's hospital.

But perhaps Curb has attracted the most attention by becoming an active historical preservationist of famous music-related sites on Music Row and in Memphis.

In June, he paid \$1 million for the Memphis ranch-style house that Elvis Presley owned before moving to Graceland in 1957.

And Curb in 2002 bought the historic RCA Studio B, the recording home to music greats such as Presley, Jim Reeves and Roy Orbison. Curb restored the cinder-block building on Music Square West and leases it to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum for \$1 per year.

It's also used these days by Belmont University students and others to learn the fine art of analog studio recording, which is akin to learning how to drive a car on a classic antique roadster.

In 2005, Curb spent \$2.6 million to purchase the former Sony Nashville headquarters, which contains the historic Columbia Records Studio A and the Quonset Hut studio made famous by the producer Owen Bradley in the 1950s and 1960s.

Curb plans to open that facility some time in mid- to late-2007. In addition to the Quonset Hut, which will be used in a similar manner as Studio B, Curb hopes to house a new songwriting degree program at Belmont in part of the space. He also plans to open a Johnny Cash museum at the portion of the building facing Music Row, which will display a cache of memorabilia he purchased from the family after the singer's death in 2003.

Far from showing off high-priced trophies, however, Curb has very specific plans in mind for his growing collection of historic properties. For Curb, music education and historic preservation go hand in hand.

"Our foundation has two major goals: One is obviously music and entertainment education. The other goal of our foundation has been to restore historic parts of the music industry," said Curb, who moved to Nashville in the early 1990s after living most of his life in the Los Angeles area.

Curb's theory being, as he put it, "if you don't know where music has been, you're not going to know where it's going."

But in the back of his mind, Curb admits that some of his passion for these historic sites is fueled by a nostalgia for the Nashville of the early 1960s when one of every two albums — country and pop — was recorded here.

"Nashville is a national player when it comes to country music and pop music. It always has been," Curb said, launching into one of his frequent music history asides that would impress even the most skilled player of Name That Tune.

"Nashville once again could be the center for all music," he mused. "It's just a matter of deciding that we want to do it. Certainly, between Nashville and Memphis, the home of the blues, we ought to be able to do the whole thing."

Programs turn out talent

Judging from the money he's spending on music and music-business education, Curb is doing much to prepare a new generation on Music Row and in Memphis to take the industry to a new level.

Wes Bulla, dean of Belmont's Curb College, said while Curb doesn't get involved in any day-to-day operations of the school, just having someone working at such high levels in the industry is an important element of the program.

"Being a businessman, he comes with a point of view that's outside our little academic world," Bulla said. "He's raised the whole bar of what we're doing."

At Belmont, graduates include rising country stars such as Julie Roberts and Josh Turner as well as established artists such as Trisha Yearwood and Brad Paisley. That's to say nothing of the many Belmont grads working behind the scenes in the entertainment business in Nashville and elsewhere.

"I can't walk down Music Row without running into somebody that went to Belmont," said Jody Williams, vice president of writer/publisher relations for the royalty organization Broadcast Music Inc., one of the largest employers in Nashville. "Mike Curb has given back a lot to the industry," Williams said. "But speaking as a Nashvillian, he's also done a lot that should make people in this city feel proud."

Curb seeks synergy

While Curb has clearly invested in Nashville, his ideal scenario calls for students at all the programs he's funded — including one at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, that focuses on contemporary Christian music — to be able tap into a particular course of study wherever it's offered.

"Right now our main goal is to take what we have and find where our various institutions can work together," Curb said, adding that he hoped some of the space housing the Quonset Hut studio could also be used as a kind of meeting area for students at all the schools where he's involved.

"My hope is that if a student wants to study the blues or the origins of R&B, maybe they can do it at the institute at Rhodes or at the Elvis Presley home," he said. "If a student wants to learn contemporary Christian music, maybe they can spend a semester at Baylor."

Curb's educational projects may still be in the early stages, but Belmont's Fisher and others said not to expect Curb to fade from view any time soon.

"Don't be fooled. At one level, he's very easy-going," Fisher said of Curb. "But at another level he's a very intense, driven person."



Nashville students Michael Inman, 13, and Frank Wong, 13, work the control board at RCA Studio B, which Mike Curb bought in 2002. (SHELLEY MAYS / FILE / THE TENNESSEAN)



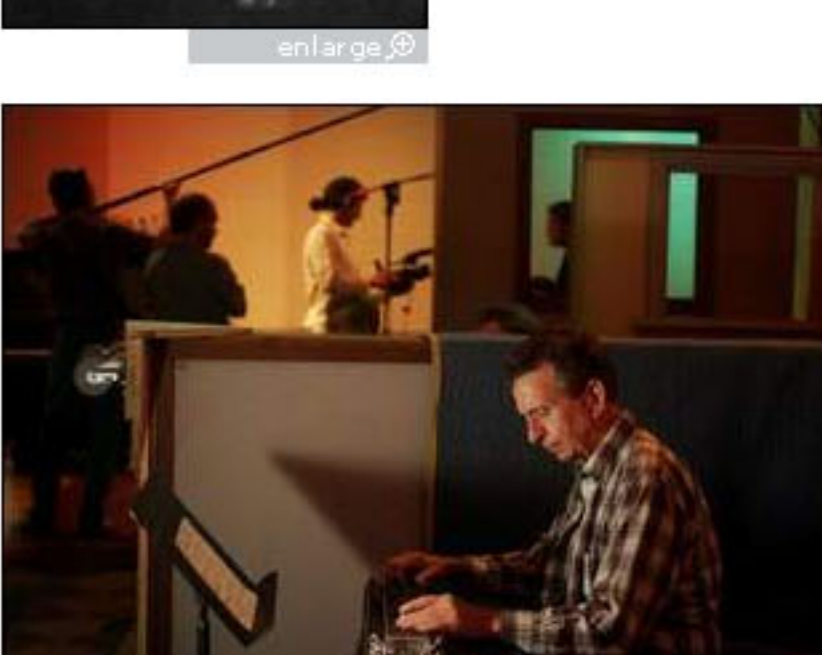
Mike Curb is a historical preservationist of famous music-related sites in Tennessee. (DIPTI VAIDYA / FILE)



Mike Curb checks out the renovation of the Quonset Hut recording studio on Music Row last week. Curb spent \$2.6 million to purchase the former Sony Nashville headquarters, one of several historical music sites he owns. (LARRY MCCORMACK/THE TENNESSEAN)



Curb also owns RCA Studio B, where artists like Elvis Presley, above, and musicians like Lloyd Green, below, recorded. Both Belmont University and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum use the facility for education. (FILE / THE TENNESSEAN)



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ABOUT MIKE CURB

- Chairman and owner of Curb Records, the longest-running independently owned record label and home to country artists Tim McGraw, LeAnn Rimes and Hank Williams Jr.
- Songwriting credits on songs for Roy Orbison, Sammy Davis Jr. and Donnie and Marie Osmond.
- Former president of MGM Records.
- Lieutenant governor of California for the 1979-1983 term.
- Chairman of Word Entertainment, a top player in Christian music.
- Chairman of Curb Entertainment International, which produces and distributes projects for film and television.
- CURB FAMILY FOUNDATION EVENTS, DONATIONS**
 - American Heart Association: Curb Golf Classic
 - Baptist Hospital (Saint Thomas Health Services): Rev. C.M. Curb Sanctuary
 - Baylor University: Curb Music & Entertainment Center
 - Belmont University: Curb Event Center; Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business; Belmont Curb College Music Row Campus.
 - California State University at Northridge: Mike Curb College of Arts, Media, and Communication; Mike Curb Endowed Chair in Music Industry Studies
 - Country Music Foundation: Curb Conservatory at Country Music Hall of Fame; Curb Records Terrace
 - Fisk University: Curb/Beaman Jubilee Singers Chair
 - Fort Campbell: Curb/Stout Patriots Theatre
 - Historic preservation: Columbia Studio A; Quonset Hut Studio; RCA Studio B; First Memphis home of Elvis Presley
 - Nashville Public Library: Curb Theatre
 - Nashville Symphony: Curb Youth Symphony; Curb Young Musicians Competition; Curb Family Music Education Center at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center
 - Rhodes College (Memphis): Mike Curb Institute for Music
 - Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt: LeAnn Rimes Fitness Center; Curb Classroom; Curb Family Library
 - Vanderbilt University: Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy; Curb Youth Symphony at Blair School of Music

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Posted: Sun Nov 26, 2006 7:58 pm

Mr. Curb,
You seem like one heck of a man. I would like to thank you as a native Tennessean for all the work you do for preservation as well as expanding the musical history of our state. It's good to see people giving back and paying forward. If we ever meet, the next drink (iced tea or otherwise) is on me.



Posted: Sun Nov 26, 2006 8:02 am

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