



MIKE DUNGAN

FINDING THE JOY

“You can make great music, then figure out how to get it through the system,” Mike Dungan told *HITS* in 2019. “That’s how you really win.” As UMG Nashville’s boss, Dungan has cultivated one of the winningest rosters in country, with acts that continue to grow both commercially and creatively. This includes Luke Bryan, Chris Stapleton, Keith Urban, Eric Church, Sam Hunt, Carrie Underwood, Little Big Town, Jon Pardi, Darius Rucker, Dierks Bentley, Brothers Osborne, Kacey Musgraves and recent Grammy-nominated breakout Mickey Guyton.

With a strong 21.9 country marketshare in 2020, Dungan and his team—with



Clockwise from top left: Early days with Alabama, Razy Bailey and Dean Dillon; John Denver and Mike's wife, Jane; Whitney Houston; Alan Jackson, Allen Butler, Tim DuBois and Dungan

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estimable President Cindy Mabe keeping the engines hot—have earned huge sales and streams, radio smashes and awards hardware galore. They’ve also notched the top two most-streamed country songs in Stapleton’s “Tennessee Whiskey” (1.4 billion) and Hunt’s “Body Like a Back Road” (1.2 billion).

“My desire is to turn a profit to maintain a 90-person staff and return value to our shareholders,” he noted to *HITS*. “But I really want our artists to be big, and I mean *artists*. They’re great at pushing back when we get ‘too record company.’ The minute you start to change them, you fuck it up. So, honestly, I’m less concerned about style than I am greatness.”

Dungan is a serial raconteur and among the most likable guys in Nashville, but don’t let the big smile, hearty laugh and affinity for giant wooden bears carved by chainsaw fool you—the Cincinnati-born Chairman and CEO of UMG is one shrewd record man. With a fierce determination to let the artists define themselves and follow their own paths, he’s built Nashville’s most enduring and diverse label group by maintaining a strong commitment to individualizing what his team does.

Always civic-minded, he received the 2014 Frances Preston Lifetime Music Industry Achievement Award at The T.J. Martell Foundation Nashville Honors Gala. As for his politics, his firebrand liberalism on social media puts the lie to clichés about all Nashville execs being hidebound conservatives. What’s more, he puts his money and his time where his mouth is, using his megaphone and resources to support candidates and issues aligned with his convictions.

Dungan didn’t grow up a country-music fan. He was a voracious consumer of music, but as with many kids his age, his tastes ran more toward rock, Black music and radio pop.



Clockwise from top left: Dungan with Tim DuBois; with Arista Nashville artist Steve Wariner; with Keith Urban; with Little Jimmy Dickens, Grand Ol Opry, 2004; fishing with Luke Bryan; at FanFair, 1995; with Dierks Bentley

So hungry to be where the music was, Dungan, who was in a local band called **The Rascals**, took a job at a department store where music was sold.

As he explained to *The Tennessean*, “I was the classic music-rat kid to whom music simply meant everything. I conned my way into a job taking out the trash at the coolest record department in Cincinnati, a very funky mass merchant called **Swallens**. Despite the odd surroundings, this was THE place to hang and shop for music. I was only 16 years old, but I absolutely thrived in that music-retail environment. I went from there to a couple other places, went to school, got a degree in biology, but I couldn’t give up the music thing.”

His enthusiasm caught the attention of **RCA**, where he was hired to do pop promotion locally and in Detroit and Minneapolis. It was 1979; Dungan played a role in the regional success of everyone from **Hall & Oates**, **Rick Springfield**, **Jefferson Starship** and **Bruce Hornsby** to **John Denver**, **Perry Como**, **Roger Whittaker**, **Henry Mancini** and **Eurythmics**.

He spent eight years in promotion, then moved back into sales with **BMG Distribution**. Named Midwest Regional Marketing Director for **Arista** in 1989, he was waist-deep in the music and couldn’t have been happier. That’s when label prez **Tim DuBois** decided Dungan ought to take a stab at Nashville.

In 1990 Dungan took the leap as part of **Arista Nashville’s** start-up. The timing proved prescient. “Truth is, the success of **Garth Brooks** caused the American populace to look over here,” Dungan told *HITS*, “where they also discovered **Alan Jackson**, **Brooks & Dunn**, **Diamond Rio**, **Patty Loveless** ... People in the suburbs were our consumers; instead of **Billy Joel**, it was **John Michael Montgomery**. From that moment on, our big bucket of profit shifted to the suburbs. For the first time, country music was respected by everyone in this business.”

It wasn’t long before the fledgling label minted superstars in Jackson and Brooks & Dunn. **Pam Tillis** subsequently became a platinum artist and, in 1994, **CMA Female Vocalist of the Year**.

Dungan, meanwhile, went from Sr. Director of Marketing and Sales (1991) to VP (1992) to being named Arista’s Most Valuable Executive (1993) to SVP Sales and Marketing (1994).

“I’d gone all in: Got a mullet, red cowboy boots, was buttoning my shirt up to the top,” Dungan told *HITS* in 2019. “But the music made me think about how early rap was all about the struggles and everyday occurrences on the street. When I was at the Arista national convention, coming from the pop division, where I’d worked with all the urban guys, I had Brooks & Dunn performing. They were all like, ‘Damn, this stuff is wild. The only music that’s really real like this is rap, because it’s telling it like it is about the people making the music.’”

By 1997, Dungan was not only GM/SVP of Arista Nashville but was also overseeing **Arista Austin**, **Arista Latin** and **Career Records**. Eclectic, groundbreaking, rule-defying, these labels were signing intriguing artists, running the gamut from **Robert Earl Keen** and **Abra Moore** to future Nashville **Songwriter Hall of Fame** hitmaker **Brett James**.

In July 2000 President of **EMI Music Roy Lott** persuaded him to claim the top spot at **Capitol Nashville**, home to **Garth Brooks**,



Dungan, Mabe and their Capitol Nashville family in 2011

“I know people say, ‘UMG Nashville is glutted with superstars.’ But I always tell them, ‘Here’s a list of our artists who’ve had success for 15 years, who’ve had success for five to eight, who’ve just started to have success and who still haven’t. Pick up the phone and call them. See if they’re happy here.’”

Dierks Bentley and a developing Keith Urban. But the situation quickly became complicated. As Dungan later told *HITS*, “In 2000, I went to Capitol—and [Arista] made it difficult for me. I’d show up every day there and chain-smoke in a non-smoking building, alone, while they made me wait out my contract.”

When the wait was over, he started his retooling of Capitol. In addition to making Urban a superstar, over the next few years Dungan and co. signed Little Big Town, Bryan, Rucker, Church and the heat-seeking crossover supernova Lady Antebellum (now Lady A). Rucker’s Capitol Nashville tenure marked an extraordinary second act, as he was transformed from a ’90s pop-rock star to a bona fide and enduring presence on the country landscape.

Dungan also worked hard to create alliances, joining the **Country Radio Broadcasters** in what was then an unprecedented move. He told *All Access* that he was fighting the notion that radio was the enemy. “Radio’s job is to draw and maintain listeners, so that they can monetize through ad sales,” he reasoned. “It is a label’s job to convince them that our ‘product’ will help them accomplish their goals... The decision to join this board was a no-brainer for me. I wanted to rebrand Capitol with my personality and try to move it in another direction.”

Dungan also became, in 2005, President of the Country Music Association. He remains a Director at Large, a job he takes seriously as stewardship of the genre.

Doing the right thing for the artists, the music *and* the big picture was his compass. By Q1 of 2010, *HITS* reported, “The biggest single label gainer is Mike Dungan’s Capitol Nashville (5.5%, +4.2).” A midyear report similarly hailed the company’s spike of 2.5 points, from 1.8 to 4.3%. As the year came to an end, *Hits Daily Double* said, “The year’s big

winner was Mike Dungan’s Capitol Nashville.”

Not long after **EMI Nashville** was launched on Dungan’s watch, in 2010, **Lucian Grainge** appointed him to the top spot at UMGN. HDD called the deal “a whopper—said to be four times that of his contract with EMI.” Dungan explained in 2014, “Lucian had been courting me for a few months, and it was very emotional. I didn’t want to leave the artists and staff at Capitol, the family I loved and felt like I’d built. But I also knew what Lucian was creating.”

People in Nashville were floored but also full of anticipation. Shortly after Dungan took over the home of **Vince Gill**, **George Strait**, **Shania Twain**, **Reba McEntire**, **Sugarland** and **Musgraves**, the merger with Capitol Nashville was announced.

Dungan marveled, “It was kinda like the Brady Bunch after the merge... There was some redundancy, but not much.” He named **Brian Wright**, **Mabe** and **Royce Risser** to expanded posts in A&R, Marketing and Promotion, respectively. It was a time of maximizing strengths and leaning into the roster.

As for his new home, he revealed, “From a distance, you form opinions about artists. I came in the door and in a lot of cases, found out I was wrong. Universal had a strong roster that maybe was underperforming.”

By mid-2013, Dungan had taken UMG’s marketshare to 4.9%. In November HDD noted, “Dungan is on fire, heading toward a possible 6.0 year-end marketshare among all labels and with 30% of the overall country market, not to mention 35% of current country releases, under his control.” By year’s end that would mean 5.3% of total sales.

Dungan also went where few Music City execs ever wander: the **Kennedy Center**. In 2013 he joined **USC Thornton** Vice Dean **Chris Sampson** and producer **Darrell Brown** as part of

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With Sir Lucian Grainge and Kacey Musgraves (left); “Grandma” visits Carrie Underwood

opera singer **Renée Fleming**’s *American Voices*.

In 2014, Hunt signed with MCA Nashville. The songwriter with the smooth, hip-hop style showed country could stream with *Montevallo*’s string of #1s.

That year also saw Dungan tap Mabe as President of the label group. “Throughout her career,” he told *The Hollywood Reporter*, “Cindy has consistently shown that she is the most brilliant marketing person this business has ever seen.”

In 2015, Stapleton exploded, thanks to an incendiary CMA’s performance with **Justin Timberlake**. *Traveller* became a chart monster; five years later it remains country’s undisputed streaming champ.

Dungan was named 2016’s *Billboard* Country Music Executive of the Year, followed in 2017 by both the CRB’s prestigious President’s Award and the President’s Award for Outstanding Achievement from **Music Biz**.

For all the honors, there are also dreams. On July 23, 2016, Dungan returned to his hometown to throw out the first pitch at a **Cincinnati Reds** game. As he explained to *Music Row*, “In the days leading up to it, my staff tortured me with **YouTube** videos of the worst first pitches in history. And fuck me if every one of them raced through my mind when I stepped on that mound! But somehow, I managed to throw my off-speed stinger for a strike. A big, looping, 38 mph strike.”

Finding the joy is part of Dungan’s success. He’s also a major proponent of keeping it real; recognizing the need to bring the core country consumer to streaming, he implored **Amazon**, **Apple**, **Spotify** and the other DSPs to teach the market how to stream.

It paid off. In 2016 Luke Bryan hit 292 million streams, up to 360 million the next year. By 2018 Stapleton was north of 410 million streams, with Hunt just under 340 million and Church topping 330 million. As of press time, in on-demand audio streams total activity to date Bryan is just under 5.8 bil-

lion, Stapleton approaching 3.7 billion, Hunt and Church each surpassed 3.8 billion.

Stapleton and Church were both outside-the-box signings that proved hugely successful. Californian honky-tonk revivalist Jon Pardi, a similarly unconventional inking, not only achieved chart traction but subtly altered the direction of the genre itself.

Carrie Underwood came to UMG in 2017, co-producing *Cry Pretty* and launching an all-female tour that flew in the face of radio’s continued resistance to women. “The Champion,” her song with **Ludacris** for the NFL, packed a massive punch, after which the *American Idol* winner’s already huge career went into overdrive.

Underwood was one of the few female country stars who could scale the charts in the male-dominated radio world. But despite the format’s resistance to women artists, Dungan doubled down, signing promising newcomers **Guyton**, **Caylee Hammack**, **Kylie Morgan**, **Chrissy Metz** and **Kassi Ashton**.

Asked about his deep bench of big acts, Dungan told *HITS* in 2019, “I know people say, ‘UMG Nashville is glutted with superstars.’ But I always tell them, ‘Here’s a list of our artists who’ve had success for 15 years, who’ve had success for five to eight, who’ve just started to have success and who still haven’t. Pick up the phone and call them. See if they’re happy here.’”

To be sure, he’s continued to champion new talent (Mickey Guyton, Hammack), veterans (**Vince Gill**, Alan Jackson) and the left-field (*Duck Dynasty*, Bentley’s alter-ego group **Hot Country Knights**). And in 2020 Dungan watched Underwood and Church take Entertainer of the Year at the ACMs and CMAs.

From a cultural standpoint, Guyton’s pointed material addressed racism and gender in ways that pushed the envelope for the genre—and made her the very first black female artist to be nominated for a Best Country Solo Performance Grammy.

For all the music he’s seen and artists he’s listened to, in the end, you can’t take the boy out of the Swallows. But looking at Dungan’s success, why would anyone want to? ■