



CINDY

TAKING COUNTRY TO NEW PLACES



MABE

INTERVIEW BY HOLLY GLEASON

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MG Nashville President **Cindy Mabe** knows what it means to be a fan. Long before she was running point on the marketing of newcomer **Carrie Underwood** and former classmate **Brad Paisley**, she was taking notes while watching awards shows and cornering her local radio personnel to get her questions about “how it works” answered.

The marketing-forward veteran, who understands

that each artist is unique, has created a roster that is hand-tended and always growing. Whether it’s **Chris Stapleton**, **Kacey Musgraves**, **Eric Church**, **Luke Bryan**, **Jon Pardi**, **Alan Jackson**, **George Strait**, **Brothers Osborne** or **Mickey Guyton**, Mabe homes in on her artists’ strengths, protects their fragile sides and finds the trajectories that work for all.

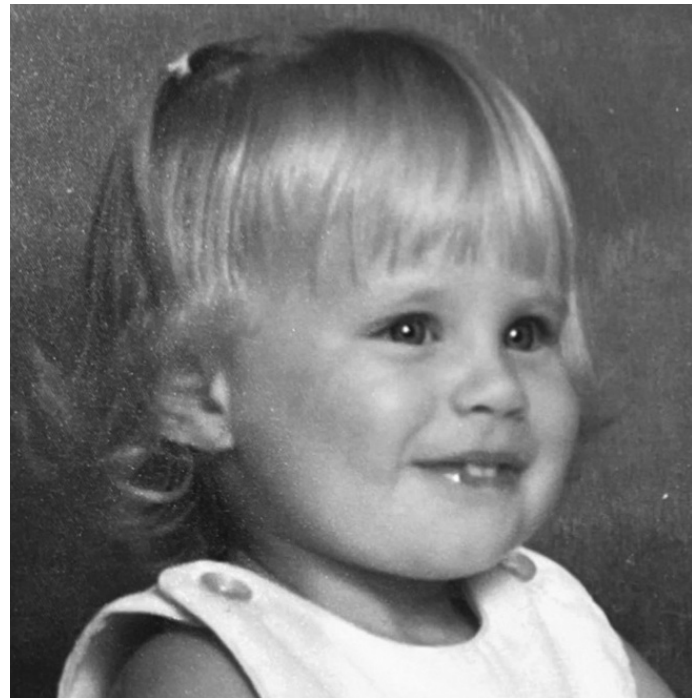
Running a ticketing/meet-and-greet business while still in college, the young woman who acted as promotion coordinator and **SoundScan** puller at **RCA Nashville** while taking night classes to finish college wasn’t—and isn’t—afraid of the work. After extricating herself from a dead-end job at **RJ Reynolds**, bailing on **UNC-Chapel Hill** and landing in Nashville, the passionate—some would say fierce—executive has created a singular career for herself. This is **Cindy Mabe’s** story, in her own words.

A SMALL-TOWN CAROLINA GIRL

We were from a tiny town surrounded by tobacco fields and woods. There wasn’t a ton to do, so we played in the woods and ran through the tobacco fields. You helped your granddaddy pick sweet potatoes—that’s what our life was like. We lived on a plot of land; my grandmother lived right in front of us, my aunt lived to the left of us, my uncle lived to the right of us. It was sweet and a wonderful place to grow up. When my kids go back there, they would prefer to be there than to be in Nashville.

What touched me the most was music. It was more than just country music, but country is my sweet spot, for sure—the storytelling, the escapism. My first records were **Charlie Daniels** and **Dolly Parton**. Around high school, it was **Reba**; on my softball team, they would call me **Wynonna** because I played **The Judds** from front to back. I went to every concert that I could drive to. I owned everything **George Strait** ever made. **Alabama** was huge, **Randy Travis**—those were my go-to artists.

But growing up, I got to a place of, “I’m a Type A personality; gotta figure out what the next step is.” Rushing so hard to get through being a kid to getting through school, getting through college. Once I got there, I was like, “What am I going to do with the rest of my life?”



Mabe and Alan Jackson



PHOTO: CHRIS HOLLO

Mabe with Mike Dungan and Kacey Musgraves

I had gone to Nashville when I was 16 years old for **Fan Fair**. I was like, “I’m home. These are my people.” It really was the turning point. We had **The Nashville Network**, so my information came from my local radio station, TNN and the awards shows. I literally have notebooks full of information that I gathered from them, from who an artist thanked on a **CMA** or **ACM Awards** show to what artists were on every label. By the time I ever moved to Nashville, I knew everybody. I knew the [label] presidents, who were high up enough that they were called out on awards shows. So it gave me this crazy roadmap.

BELMONT

What sold me on **Belmont** was the intern board. You saw all these jobs that were right there on Music Row, when Music Row was still Music Row. I had some great teachers and some not-so-great teachers. My class had **Brad Paisley**, who was dating my roommate at the time. **Kelley Lovelace** [who would become a hit songwriter] was cheating off my finance papers so that he could pass finance.

I just wanted to be at a record label. The first one was **Arista Records**. I knew Arista because I knew **Alan Jackson**, who was booming at the time. It was a new label, and I had heard all about **Tim Dubois** and **Clive Davis** from listening to people talk on the **CMAs**. Plus, I love **Pam Tillis**; I was in her fan club. But Alan was my guy, which is weird, how full circle we’ve come. [The Arista opening] was for publicity. What I learned is that I was not meant for that.

BREAKING IN

The next semester, I found one for marketing at **RCA**. I’m like, “Oh yes!” First week, I don’t know the rules of it, so I go in and they’re doing this **Aaron Tippin** song; they’re saying, “We’re going to send this to radio on this day.” The next day I come in with a handwritten marketing plan on what we really should do with the project. I’m an intern; I’ve been there for two weeks. But they’re like, “You’re kind of intense over here; quiet but intense.” Later that day, they were like, “It’s actually a pretty good idea.” We ended up doing the idea.

I would take on all these extra jobs and hated every one of them. I wondered how people lived like this. People worked at **RJ Reynolds**—that’s where I worked, you know. I also tried to do other things, everything from waitressing to selling knives to working in the mailroom. I did it all. And they were all terrible jobs. Some people can shut their brain off and it’s just about paying the bills. But for me, it tore my soul up.

When I was in college, I thought I’d go into sports marketing, because the **Winston Cup** was still with **RJ Reynolds** at that time. That was attainable; it’s my backyard—**NASCAR** is in Charlotte. But I wasn’t passionate about it, so I thought, “How does my local radio station have Alabama coming in to do interviews? How does that happen?” Then I thought, “I don’t know anybody at the radio station, but I could call and see if somebody would at least explain this to me and help me figure out how we go from here to there.”

That’s what I did. I called the general manager. He let me come in for an interview. I literally quizzed the man on everything about how radio works, why the artists come through here. I was so desperate to find what I’m here for, knowing I am not here to work at **RJ Reynolds**.



TJ Osborne, Mike Dungan, Lauren Alaina, Carrie Underwood, John Osborne, Mabe, Mickey Guyton, Diane Warren, Leslie Lewis, Caylee Hammack, Adam Hambrick, Travis Denning, Jon Langston

“THE KEY TO ALL OF IT, NO MATTER WHO YOU’RE MARKETING, IS TREAT YOUR ARTISTS LIKE INDIVIDUALS.”



Mabe and her family with Carrie Underwood

As Christmas approached, Joe Galante came back from New York. They’re like, “Hey, we’re getting rid of half of the staff and half of these artists.” There were too many jobs to do and not that many people. So Randy Goodman said, “Hey, people say good things about you. Would you like to bid for a job?”

They wanted me to come in and pull the **SoundScan** every morning, back when you had to be in there at 5am so everybody had it before work. Then I became the sales coordinator, but I had to move my classes to night.

It was just a massive process, but it taught me a ton. I was still just a college kid, and I knew how to do all that stuff. It was awesome to soak it up—anything anybody wanted to teach me. I

also got to do the tickets, meet and greets—no one ever wants that job. But I would take whatever they would give me.

THE GALANTE FACTOR

Joe did not have a lot of time or patience for people, so he’d walk down the hall and ask a question and just keep talking. Once he let me sit in the marketing meetings, he would say, “Cindy, what is your opinion on this?” If I didn’t spit it out [right away], he just moved on; it was embarrassing. If I was passionate about something, I could make myself jump in really quick. So Joe’s like, “She needs some media training,” and he paid for me to go to media training. It helped. It was a terrible experience, but also invaluable.

Unfortunately or fortunately, however you see it, Joe unleashed a beast in me. When things would start going sideways, I’d jump in to where he’s like, “Cindy, you’re either going to go really far in this company or you’re gonna get your tongue cut out of your mouth.”

There were several meetings where he said, “Cindy, you can’t talk in this meeting.” I don’t think I was being super-aggressive, but even as an introverted kid in a very male-dominated room, I could not be a yes-man. People would look at the floor whenever I opened my mouth, like, “I can’t make eye contact with you because you’re going to get burned alive



Mabe with Dungan and Luke Bryan

today.” And several days I did. But great things came from that, in my opinion.

ENTER DUNGAN

Mike [who was running Capitol Nashville at the time] came to me, and I was five months pregnant. I hadn’t even told Joe [about the pregnancy]. I hadn’t really thought about leaving; I get super-attached, for better and for worse, to my artists. We were making some things happen, particularly with Brad and Carrie Underwood.

But it was hard to be five months pregnant and getting the crap beat out of you over and over again. About that time, Mike texts me out of nowhere. I don’t have his cell phone; I don’t know who’s texting me. He texted and asked if I would be interested in [SVP Marketing] Fletcher Foster’s position. I’m like, “What? Who is this?”

So Dungan has a random attorney try to find my attorney. I don’t have an attorney; I’m just a kid—but I found an attorney after that. I didn’t say no to him. He didn’t officially make me an

offer, but you know, he was like, “I would really like you to come over. You are pretty serious. That’s my only worry about you, is that you’re pretty serious.”

I didn’t hear back from him again for like four more months. I said, “Don’t tell me what the job is even offering. I mean, I understand what the title is. I don’t want to make this a money decision. This is going to be: Can I leave these people or not? And I am nine months pregnant, so there’s a risk, and I just need to make sure.” He’s like, “I promise you that we will match your insurance before you even start day one.”

So I sit on it for a minute, and he starts to freak out, and I’m thinking, “How am I going to do this? Can I really do this? I’m nine months pregnant.” That’s why it’s not an absolute yes. And then I’m like, “But I’d also hate to stay here. I can’t stay here anymore.” So I do it. I tell [Sony Nashville], and then it was a rough go with so many people for a while.

BETTING ON INDIVIDUALITY

I honestly think a lot of it comes from who these people are. They’re not alike; they don’t fit in the same slot and aren’t going after the same slot. We can go after Luke Bryan and say, “He was part of this bro-country movement.” I’d argue maybe he started it. But that was never our intent.

What Eric Church was trying to do was nothing like what Luke was trying to do. Everybody’s running their own race—and they certainly both got there. Look at Darius [Rucker]; he had to overcome being the Hootie & the Blowfish guy to being taken seriously. Keith Urban has nothing in common with any of those people. To me, they are so different. The key to all of it, no matter who you’re marketing, is treat your artists like individuals.

If you can start there and work your way backwards, whether you’re talking about Chris Stapleton, Eric Church, whoever you’re talking about, it’s about “How do I feel you? That’s where our sweet spot is. That’s going to be our audience—what do they want? How do we build it? What do you have to say?” Those are the things that, if you can just feed it and pull it out of them, then you can build the rest of it. But you have to set a tone for what they’re trying to say.

THE UNIVERSAL MERGER

We had such a great company at Capitol. We had a lot of fun. We had the right number of artists; it was small, but we were powerful. Then they picked Mike off, and the rumor was we were going to Warner. Then Universal comes

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Clockwise from top left: With Sam Williams, Darius Rucker, George Strait and Keith Urban

and takes Mike. For six months we didn't have a leader; we didn't have anything happening. It was me and **Steve Hodges** and **Tom Becci** running things at that point.

We signed **Brothers Osborne** during those six months. We still were making things happen, and everybody's questioning every day if they're going to have a job. You try to calm people down and say, "Let's just keep moving forward," which is why we signed Brothers.

Next thing you know, it goes from Warner to Universal, and then it's still "Who's gonna stay?" because there's duplicates—you don't need two people to head promotion. My mandate was, "You have five days to determine who's going to be on your team." I can't determine anything in five days. I don't know if these people are good or bad. It was rough. Then, having to let people go... some of them were my friends. And once the merger actually happened, you had two very different company cultures.

You just have to get to a rhythm so that people can work and trust each other. It has taken a long time, and sometimes there's still ghosts in the halls—and you don't even know why. I told Mike, "I'm not going to sign a contract when I come over here, because I don't really know if I can do this."

FORWARD MOTION

I had two kids when I was at Capitol; I had **Jesse** within three weeks of starting over there, and I had **Lexi** two and a half years later. And **Ella** was a complete surprise in 2015, just after they promoted me to president.

My contract was up in early 2014. The CEO job at Sony was open and they called me. I did fly up and meet with them and had good conversations. But I was still pulled by this roster that I'd built. There were people I loved at Sony—Carrie Underwood for sure. But man, I *built* this. Chris Stapleton, Sam Hunt and **Kacey Musgraves** were hot. Like, this is the next generation; how do we change where we're going with country music?

Mike is the person who bet on me, maybe when I wouldn't have bet on myself. We are a great team because we don't compete with each other; we're in two different lanes but add value together. So the more I kept thinking about it, the more I felt like, "Man, this feels very daunting to go back to Sony when we're winning now; what more is going to make me happy?" At some point, you just have to live your life and say, "My job is not to go and win one for the team; it's to just be *part* of the team." So long story short: **Lucian** weighed in; we had a lot of talks. Mike and I had talks. Ultimately, they offered for me to stay as president. And that was that.

CARRIE UNDERWOOD

I'd been waiting for that one for a long time. I had always hoped we would get to work together again, because she was probably the hardest one to leave. She was my partner the minute she came off *Idol*. We grew up together; I watched Carrie digest this town from figuring out how to look at it as an outsider to becoming part of it to ruling it.

BOTTOM LINE

I had years of training. I go back and say, "OK, Joe taught me about running a business. We took finances to the nth degree." So I know what it's gonna look like. I know how far I can push before it's "Stop—we're going to have to drop this guy if it doesn't pay off." But on Chris Stapleton, it was like, "No, we've got the dice in our hands, man. This one could actually pay off." So when the CMAs said they'd book Chris Stapleton with **Justin Timberlake** even if no one knows him if we would pay for the performance, I was like, "OK, this is probably what I can afford; this is what we can do to get to this point." And it paid off. I mean, I can't tell you that they all pay off. I've lost—I've lost a lot—but I just felt like this was going to happen. I don't know that I ever dreamed it could be this big, though.

There's a part of me in these situations going, "What are we doing?" Look at Kacey Musgraves. She hit a wall going 90 miles an hour on her second release after *Same Trailer, Different Park*. Maybe she never wanted to be a mainstream star. But then you turn around and look where we're at now. That **Grammy** Album of the Year win for *Golden Hour* was for everybody to say, "There's not just one play." You have to be able to connect to an audience that looks different and is inclusive in so many different ways.

It's not one thing, and again, having Chris and Kacey both in that same range during the same time was like, "Oh man, I've been living for that moment." And again, it was a big piece of why I couldn't go back to Sony. This is what we're building right now. I'm in the middle of building. We haven't seen it through.

Whatever's wrong with country music can be cured by having one piece of truth that cuts through to people, to the heart. And that's what we get to touch. ■