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JON HUBER

MAKING IT BIG
^{cigar}
~~IN MUSIC~~ CITY

CROWNED HEADS

Jon Huber has many dreams, it just so happens most of them are happening this year. With launching a new company, getting married and spending time with his son; leaving Nashville was never an option.

Jon, you have been keeping pretty busy confusing everyone.

What else is new and why wouldn't I? Ya know what, if it was up to me, I would have come out with this two months ago. There's just a lot of behind the scenes things that we had to wait and wait and wait and wait. There was a lot of, "Don't tell anyone anything we're doing." I was more anxious to talk then I would be allowed to talk, let's put it that way. A lot of it had to do with behind the scenes stuff with ST (Scandinavian Tobacco) and finalizing their departure from the building that we used to have and all that good stuff. That was not a very pretty picture and nobody wanted to ruffle any feathers, so we were just trying to keep as quiet as possible for as long as we could. It looks like everything is moving along the way it should.

So can I assume for the last two months you've been gainfully employed?

Yes, For the last two months I have been gainfully employed, correct. No question. What we're doing is something that we talked about for probably 14 months now but something that didn't really come into fruition and full steam until after we departed C.A.O. Our last day there was December 17th and to put it into perspective, I think it was maybe the 19th or the 20th we had our first real meeting. We took one week off after Christmas to spend with our families and we've been working every day since. In fact, right now I'm standing outside of the new space we're moving into, because they're painting in their. So I'm able to enjoy a good cigar.

You keep saying we Jon, obviously you're still in Nashville.

Who is we? I say we because it's a force of habit, a "There's

no I in team" kind of thing. I am lucky that I'm working now with some people that I was working with at C.A.O. Basically it's Mike Conder, he's my partner. Mike Conder was the Sr. VP of Marketing at C.A.O. He was essentially my boss really. Great guy, we've been working together for a bunch of years and before C.A.O. he was with Litto for a little bit. Then before Litto, ironically, he was with General Cigars for about 20 years. So Mike's basically my partner, then we also got Michael Trebing who was the Creative Media Manager at C.A.O. I worked with Michael for about a dozen years and Nancy Heathman who was the graphic designer there, we brought her along as well. Nancy's been working with us for a couple of years. We're hoping to grow over the next couple of months, but right now we're just in the phase of getting into the space and getting furniture. It's an exciting time.

So this is obviously a new venture, do we have a name yet?

We do have a name. The name of the company is Crowned Heads. Crowned Heads is the name of the company, it's not the name of the brand, we haven't released the name of the brand yet. That all is being looked at right now by the attorney's to see if we can go forward with that actual name. It has a name, a concept, a whole bit and really at this point the most important thing that we're doing is pretty much looking for the right fit for a manufacturer. So last month we flew down to Tampa and met with a couple guys that are prominent in tobacco in terms of growing and kinda picked their brains. Next month we're going to be going down to have some meetings in Miami and Nicaragua.

Luckily we have the luxury of taking our time, so it's not like I feel



like I'm under the gun to come out with the Casa de Huber or it's gonna be at the IPCPR. I don't even know if we're gonna be at IPCPR. If the cigar's not right and everything's not buttoned up, then we'll wait and release it in October or November, whenever. So I'm lucky enough that I don't have to worry about having to sell, sell, sell which is a nice change from where we were with C.A.O. Towards the end it was all about numbers and all about volume and all about money.

Was that a result of the previous merger? Oh it was always that way. As soon as ST got involved, that last year, 2010, there was no joy to be had in Mudville. They managed to suck all the joy out of creating, as far as I could tell in the marketing department. It became all about, 'How are you gonna make the numbers? How are gonna make the money?' and unfortunately that makes you have to do some things that you wouldn't normally do, like sell your products sometimes where you wouldn't normally want it to be sold.

I never want to be put in that position again and when I agreed to do this, I said, "This is how I see it, this is how I want to do it." Everyone was on board with the idea of keeping it small, keeping it, I hate to use the word boutique, It's so overused today and small batch is overused. Essentially I just want to make cigars that are quality, that live up to our standards. If we can make more, we'll make more. If we can't, we can't. If we can make 500,000, we'll make 500,000 or whatever it is that number will be. This project is really about details and quality and control. Ya know, just controlling how the brand is perceived, how the cigars smoke, everything. That also goes for the website, the apparel, everything.

I wrote a blog the other day about when I play ball with my kid, my 10 year old son Liam. One of his favorite things is when something doesn't go right he says, "I want a do-over" and I'm like 'Okay, do-over', well this is our do-over. So now we have the luxury saying in the 12 to 14 years we were working at C.A.O., "What did we do right? What did we not do right?" So now we have a do-over to say, okay, this is how we'd do it if we have a second chance," and we're fortunate enough to get that second chance.

You guys obviously have a lot of marketing talent there, so



Jon came up with the idea for the name Crowned Heads while watching *The Wizard of Oz* on his iPad (left). The name now proudly adorns a chalkboard on the wall of the new office (right).

you should be able to promote it pretty good. Realistically, I'll be honest with ya, I think when I look back at C.A.O. I think what we were really successful in doing was really developing and creating a brand as opposed to outstanding cigars. We had a couple cigars that I would say, "Okay, ya know, did alright there. That was pretty good." The original Aniversario Maduro from Costa Rica '98, great cigar. La Traviata, very good cigar. But you know, in the middle of all of that you've got some cigars that to me were okay, some were a little bit better than okay, but what we really did was make everything just kind of have a vibe, a personality, a sex appeal so that we really built a brand.

Part of going forward with Crowned Heads is that I want to start with the cigar, it's more about the product, but I also want to create more of a feel and an image and a brand behind it so that people feel like they're part of the Crowned Heads lifestyle, part of the product. Which also is why we're releasing the news that we're doing this now, people are like, "Who's making your cigar," – I don't know yet, but the reason we're talking about it now is because I want people to come on board and actually pull the curtain back and say; Look, I'm going to show you what's involved in creating a startup company, from the ground up.

I want you to see when we go to Nicaragua, when we come back with samples. I want to let people sign up, ya know, the first hundred people, you want to try this cigar? Let me know what you think. I want people to feel a part of the process. You build it for

us. So when it does come out on the shelf, you do see a box of whatever by Crowned Heads; whether that be August, September, October, whenever, you're going to feel like, "Hey I was part of that, I was one of the tasters on that. I saw when these guys were getting their furniture together. I saw when they did this. I saw when they did that. I saw when they had this argument."

Just really have people feel an affinity, I want it to be a people's brand more than anything. I want people to really feel a part of it and ya know if that's a hundred people, fine. If it's a thousand people, great. This isn't about volume and numbers and how many people I can get to follow me on Twitter. It's more about the right audience and making them feel good about the product.

I think that adds a lot of personality to the brand. Like you said, not to use the word boutique, but it brings it a lot closer to people. Exactly. One of the things I think we did do good at C.A.O. was that we were accessible to our end users or our consumers. Whether that be through social media, whether it be through in stores or whatever. I just really want to take that aspect of what we did well there and really kind of bring it to the next level and be accessible and be available and really have people feel like their partners in the brand. That's the game plan going forward.

Will you have the same roles as before; will you be the social media guy, the store events guy, the blending guy. I see the new company being as far away from corporate as possible. I had my fill of working for a corporation. The ST thing just left a bad taste in my mouth. I said, "Let's make this more like a band." There's a lead singer. There's a front man, he's the most visible, but he's only as good as the drummer or the bass or the guitar or the keys. We have business cards, but there are no titles. Nobody has a title. It's open, it's everybody contributes, it's a creative environment. Am I going to do social media? Yeah I'll still do social media. Michael Trebing is going to be in charge of our Facebook page, I don't want anything to do with Facebook. I'm not a big fan, so he can deal with that. It's been a really organic, cool, less restrictive environment.

You mentioned some of the brands you had worked on with C.A.O. Do you have any personal concern over the future of those or are you beyond them at this point? No, don't care (laughing). I really don't. Ya know, honestly it's weird, if you had asked me that three years ago, I was married to the brand. I loved the brand, I love the family. To me C.A.O. will always be the Ozgener family. It will always be Cano, it will always be Tim, especially. That's how I look at C.A.O. I think people put pressure on General Cigar, are they gonna maintain C.A.O.? What are they really going to do to C.A.O.? The reality of it is that C.A.O. is gone. It will never be C.A.O. again, because the people that made that brand are gone. They can keep producing the cigars, they can keep doing whatever, it's not gonna be the same thing. C.A.O. was more, the way we built it, about people and relationships and those things are gone. So to expect General Cigar to maintain, improve or any of that is unrealistic. I've pretty much emotionally detached myself from that brand, that product, because it's gone for me.

Now obviously you've created your own thing here with the help of the others. Were there a lot of other offers on the table? I don't know that there were a lot of offers on the table to

be honest with you. I never really put it out there so much. Ya know a year ago, in January of 2010 that's when the reality really kind of hit; we knew they were gonna merge and then when they said "Okay, General Cigars, etc, etc, etc," if you had half a brain you go, "Okay, well at some point in the next year or two, this company is going to move to Richmond. There's no way in hell I'm moving to Richmond." Simply because everything in my life is here. My son is here. My fiancé is here. The people I love to work with are here. I love this city, I love the town, the people that have supported us. They could have tripled my salary and I wouldn't have moved to Richmond. That being said, we kind of knew that was going to happen and we knew it was going to be gone.

I talked to a couple of people, people that I respect. I just knew that whatever I was going to do, it was a big decision for me, my next step. I'm not getting any younger, I've been in this business for a while, I never was interested in making a lateral move. For me, I wanted to stay in the business, but it had to be, "Okay, how do I go to the next step. This is my chance, I either do it or I don't do it." For me to take my talents to go to Brand X and do the same thing there, I mean that's dumb. Nothing excites me about that. Even if I could work from home, there's no fun in that. I wanted something to be a challenge, new, I wanted to do my own thing and I was given that opportunity. So that's what really got me excited.

So were there a lot of offers? Not really, not as many as you would think. I mean I talked to a couple of people, but I was kind of having fun with some of the rumors I would hear. I talked to a guy who talked to a retailer and the retailer said he swore that Pete [Johnson], Jon and Dion [Giolito] are going to be out with their own company, it's a done deal. I'm like really? I hadn't talked to Pete or Dion in months.

It's just a hat. It's just a hat, exactly. I'm a big fan of both of those guys, I really am. Those kind of guys are doing so well on their own, there's nothing I could bring to the table that helps them out. There's a mutual respect, like with Pete and I. Would I ever work for Pete? No. Would I ever do something with Pete? Absolutely I would entertain that, anytime. I have a lot of respect for what he's done.

So you've been around now for about 15 years in the industry, who at this point has been your biggest influence? My biggest influence at this point, in the business you mean?

In general, you can go however you want with that. That's a good question. I would say that if I ever had mentors or gurus as they were in my life, it's a real short list. The first and foremost would have been my grandfather. To me, any decent quality that I have about being a person was something that was instilled by my grandfather. Then businesswise I would say, Cano Ozgener. I've learned more about this business and life from Cano than probably anybody can imagine. Like not just what we were doing in the cigar business, but Cano is just such a unique man. He's very spiritual, he's very family oriented, he's just a good example and I learned a ton from Cano.

I'd also probably through George Brightman in there, I know a few people might remember who he is or probably still know him.



Jon talking shop at the 2010 IPCPR Trade Show in New Orleans, LA held at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

George was, well his title back in the day was, Director of Business Development for Cigar Aficionado and I remember in '96 when I went to my first RTDA in Cincinnati, it was right when the boom was kicking off and I was completely green. I had just started with C.A.O. in April and I think it was June or July when we were in Cincinnati for this huge trade show. I saw this guy walking around, he always had this entourage around him and I started asking a couple questions and said, "Who is that?" They said, "Oh that's George Brightman, Cigar Aficionado, he's really influential in the business."

He was just holding court on this couch, I remember just watching the couch and as soon as it was empty; which wasn't for very long, it was like 30 seconds and someone else would sit down. I grabbed a box of C.A.O. Gold, ran over there, sat down on the couch and said, "Mr. Brightman, my name is Jon Huber, I'm with C.A.O. Cigars, I want to give you these cigars."

I didn't know any better, I just went for it and he and I developed a friendship from there forward and we just stayed in touch. He would always give me really good advice about cigars and tobacco. The guy had an amazing palate. Still does, he actually owns a retail store I think in Long Island, I haven't seen him in years.

I watched him one night, we went to dinner at Morton's in Nashville and I had five cigars, unbanded. We smoked them, this was when you could still smoke in restaurants, back in the day, and he nailed four of the five. I mean, amazing. He taught me what to look for in a good cigar, he said, "All these people want power and strength. The cigar should have balance, finesse, complexity and richness." He taught me a lot, so I'd definitely put George in the mix.

So on a personal note, when is the wedding? The big day is 78 days from today my friend.

And how many days has it been? Today would be 289.

I'm impressed that you knew both so quickly. Laura is amazing. You have some years where you're like, "What's going to happen this year?" This year is going to be big. Launching Crowned Heads, moved in together, getting married in 78 days. Honestly I couldn't be happier. It's a happy year for me, I'm very excited. You know that old saying, "Be careful what you wish for, you might get it?" Pretty much so far this year, God's been good. I'm getting everything I've ever wanted. Great woman, my own business, stayed in the cigar business, I'm happy. My boy's healthy. He has straight A's in school. It's all good.