

CROWNED HEADS



Heavy is the Head That Wears the Crown



Interview with Jon Huber of Crowned Heads

photography by Kurt Ozan / product photography by Chris Hornaday

Looking back at your trajectory, you are known as a Nashville guy through and through, however this isn't where you are originally from. Tell us a bit about your origins.

I was born and raised in San Francisco. I lived there until I was 17 years old, then I moved to Los Angeles for college and remained in L.A. until I left in the mid-90's which is when I moved to Nashville, TN.

What first brought you to Nashville?

I came to Nashville because it was essentially an 'escape' of sorts from the grind of L.A. I'd reached a point where the L.A. lifestyle was consuming me (not in a good way) and I needed to leave. There were other cities I considered relocating to at that time, but in hindsight, I'm grateful I made the move to Nashville because not only did I find my career path here, but more importantly I found the love of my lifetime here (my bride of 11 years, Laura).

For those readers who don't know, can you tell us a little bit about the culture of Nashville. What makes it so unique?

That's interesting because I probably would've answered that differently if you'd asked me the same question 10 or 15 years ago. When I first moved to Nashville, the city had this really nice 'sleepy-artist' vibe that had the feel of a small town but most of the conveniences of a large city. There was really an underground creative feel to the city with zero pretense or affectations. Today, there's still a great creative energy to the city but let's just say it's less "sleepy" and more full of IG 'influencer-selfies.' In my eyes, our city has sacrificed a lot of the old charm it once had in order to become an "It City." A lot of the beautiful

old historic homes and buildings have been dozed and replaced either with modern residential-commercial structures, or with celebrity-named theme bars pretending to be 'honky-tonks.'

You have had a long career in the cigar industry, starting with the first incarnation of C.A.O. Tell us how you began your journey and what those early days were like?

I'd reached a point in my life where I wanted to do something I was passionate about as opposed to just 'having a job.' When I was living in L.A., I became absorbed in the whole culture of just 'chasing money' and had lost sight of what was really going to bring me joy. I'd had jobs ranging from being a Private Trainer to selling commercial real estate to telemarketing indoor tanning products and dog shampoo. After a year or so of living in Nashville, I spent time really doing some soul-searching to determine what would bring me happiness and possibly a livelihood. I walked into my first retail tobacconist almost by accident. Once the aroma of the cedar and tobaccos hit me, it was like a spiritual awakening of sorts and I immediately knew what my true calling was. Longer story short: I reached out to everyone and everywhere in the business from that same tobacconist to Cigar Aficionado magazine, looking for a gig. I got rejected by everyone (including that retail tobacconist that wouldn't hire me for a \$7/hour clerk job). Fortunately, Cano Ozgener (C.A.O. Founder/Owner) responded to my letter of interest and took a chance on me. My first day on the job at C.A.O. was April 15, 1996. Back then, we were literally going from a small office space each day to Cano's wine cellar in his house where we kept the cigars. We'd load up a pickup truck, drive the product needed for that day back to the office, package everything and ship everything by hand via a UPS handwritten log. A few months later, I



was at my first trade show (the RTDA back then—now the PCA Trade Show). I remember we had to rent a pair of U-Haul trucks and drive the displays up to Cincinnati for that show. We put up the booth ourselves, did all the sales ourselves—definitely trial by fire. You need to keep in mind, this was at a time before there was social media. If we wanted to open accounts in a certain city, we'd grab a cigar magazine (like CA or Smoke), look for leading tobacconists in that city, get on a plane and literally hit the pavement going store to store. I, personally, did that with Chicago and New York city during those early days.

What was your favorite C.A.O Cigar from those days?

Hands-down the C.A.O. Aniversario Maduro (later became the C.A.O. L'Anniversaire Maduro) manufactured at Tabacalera Tambor in Costa Rica. That cigar was released in 1996 and literally put C.A.O. on the map as a premium cigar brand. We only received 9 months of production from that factory before we got booted out, but those cigars were unforgettable.

After C.A.O was sold you struck it out on your own. What was that process like when you were first forming your new venture?

The year was 2010, and some of us at C.A.O. saw the writing on the wall. My first clues to the eventual outcome was when I saw guys that I had no idea who they were coming into my office measuring everything from art to planters. I soon figured out they were preparing for the 'move' to Richmond, VA (they took everything—literally gutted the building). So I had the better part of 2010 living with the thought that the end was near. Many people speculated what I'd do next, but the honest answer is that I never thought about my next move. My entire mindset was to ride the wave all the way to the shore and stay faithful to God's plan for me. At some point in the middle of that year, Mike Conder (my boss at the time) approached me and said, "When this is over do you wanna do something?" I said 'yes' and that was about as formalized as it got. My last day at C.A.O. was December 17, 2010, and I literally took a large trash can and took everything in my office that had "C.A.O." on it—magazine articles, merch, files, etc.—threw it in the trash, and walked out the front door to meet Mike and some other marketing staff at a bar for drinks. Four days later, Mike and I had our first meeting to discuss the new venture. We literally spent the first 2 months working on the company philosophy statement before we even began discussing cigars. We felt that if we first had the philosophy nailed down, that everything we did going forward needed to be in line with that 'mission statement.' In hindsight, it was time well spent. You need to get the

foundation nailed down before you begin constructing the house.

Does the name Crowned Heads have a specific significance?

One of the first things I was responsible for was coming up with a name for the new company. I'd send Mike some ideas, and he'd like some that I did not, and vice versa. Then, some that we both agreed on the attorney shot down. One day, I was watching 'The Wizard of Oz' on an iPad and I noticed that the side of Professor Marvel's caravan had the slogan, "Crowned Heads of Europe—Past, Present and Future." I screen shot that frame and texted it to Mike and wrote, "Crowned Heads." He loved it and, fortunately, so did our attorney. I wanted the name to beg the question, "What does 'Crowned Heads' mean?," and I wanted it to be obtuse enough that it could be applied to other avenues aside from just cigars.

Which manufacturers were you initially interested in working with?

After we announced the formation of Crowned Heads in February 2011, I immediately got calls from people asking, "Who's gonna make your cigars for you?" The same people told me, "It's easy—I've got the blend and all you need to do is come up with the brand name..." That was exactly what I did NOT want to do. So, in March/April Mike and I hit the road and flew down to Miami then on to Nicaragua to visit some factories. We came home and started to evaluate our opportunities that were presented to us. At the time, we evaluated about a dozen different possibilities and literally rated each on such factors as current cigars being made, relationships, access to tobaccos, how many brands were in that house ahead of us, etc. After going through that exercise, we came to one conclusion: Ernesto Perez Carrillo. The only obstacle was that Ernesto wasn't doing any contract brands as he had just launched EPC Cigar Co. 2 years prior to that. So we rolled the dice, got Ernie on the phone and made the pitch. The rest is history.

Your first line with Crowned Heads was the Four Kicks? Tell us about the process of creating this first blend, the artwork, the meaning behind it and how it set the stage for you.

We went down to Santiago to begin work with Ernesto in the middle of 2011. Ernie was very clear about the process; he said, "You are going to create and validate this blend—if the cigar succeeds it's on you. If the cigar fails it's on you." So as opposed to buying the new car off the



lot, we went about building the car from the ground up. Ernie taught me how to evaluate each leaf, from priming to priming from region to region, farm to farm. If C.A.O. was my undergrad degree in the business, working with Ernesto was like working on my masters. With that first release (Four Kicks) our goal was to create a foundation, of sorts, a blend that was easily approachable, that could be enjoyed by a novice smoker or a seasoned enthusiast. Above all, we were looking for a balanced blend that had structure but a sense of finesse, as well. Insofar as the meaning or brand inspiration is concerned, Four Kicks was lyrically inspired by a Kings of Leon song ("Four Kicks"). It had a rebellious vibe to it and that was where my headspace was at during that time. One of the lines is, "You with your switchblade posse / I'll get my guns from the South / We'll take it to the yard like a cock fight / Four kicks, who's strutting now?" It was my middle finger in the air to corporate America at the time; a thinly veiled message to the big machine that took C.A.O. away from us. There are a lot of Easter eggs on the packaging, as well. The crossed flintlock guns, the compass that has the 'S' (South) larger than the North-East-West, the 3 stars from the Tennessee state flag on the band, etc.

What do you think contributed to your early success with Crowned Heads?

I think that early on, the relationships that Mike and I both had in the industry that we'd cultivated over the years got us in the front door. We literally started shipping to 66 doors—all of which we each had personally contacted to get on board. After that, the product had to speak for itself. We began shipping Four Kicks in November 2011, and today it remains a consistent performer within our portfolio.

One of your most beloved lines is the annual release of Las Calaveras made every year by the My Father Factory. What were the origins of this brand and your relationship with the Pepin family?

My entree into My Father Cigars was a result of my friendship with Pete Johnson. Pete and I have been friends since 1996 and he was instrumental in getting us into MFC, as he set up our first meeting with them in January of 2014. I went down to Esteli on that first visit with the specific concept of Las Calaveras in mind. I'd always wanted to do a tribute cigar for those who'd



I was first introduced to Luciano Meirelles and Eradio Pichardo in July of 2017 at the IPCPR (or was it PCA?) trade show. They presented me with some samples, we had a friendly chat, and then I put the samples in my bag. The next morning, I fired up one of those samples and was extremely impressed as I felt there was definitely some potential there. We stayed in touch and continued working on that initial blend (which would eventually become Mil Días in 2020). Our first release with Tabacalera Pichardo was Juárez in 2019.

Mil Dias is the cigar that is really seen as your crowing jewel of the last few years. Can you give us some insight into how that cigar started, how was the initial reaction and where do you see that line going?

The Mil Días journey really began in the summer of 2017 when Luciano and Eradio presented me with those first samples from Tabacalera Pichardo. My knee-jerk reaction to the initial blend was that the wrapper was close to flawless, the construction was on point, but that the flavor profile was on the aggressive side. I felt it needed some work and that we needed to round off the edges, so to speak. We worked on and off on that blend for close to

3 years. In January of 2020, Luciano sent me samples that really hit me—it was that “A-HA” moment I look for when validating a blend. As soon as I smoked it, I texted Luciano and said “we’re there.” I started referring to that blend as the “game-changer” internally because I knew we’d landed on something special and unique. We launched Mil Días in September 2020 and the brand continues to grow and grow in popularity. We’ve kept the original 4 regular production vitolas constant, but I’ve enjoyed dropping the occasional Limitada release. To date, we’ve done a Mareva, Escogidos, Magicos, and just announced the Marrantios EL 2022.

Last year, you released a limited edition with us known as the Mother Church. Was this a concept you had been working on for a while?

Mother Church was actually an idea that I had jotted down in a notebook in early 2011. When I was approached with the invitation to create a Limited Edition release for JR’s 50th Anniversary, I was sincerely honored and flattered. When I was first getting into cigars and before I got my gig with C.A.O., I used to buy cigars from JR. To celebrate JR’s 50th was like one of those full circle, pinch me I’m dreaming moments for me. The only directive I was given was to do something that “says Nashville.” Once I heard that, a lightbulb went off and

passed on, but not in a morbid sort of fashion. I wanted to celebrate the lives of those we had lost. While I was on that trip, we also birthed Tennessee Waltz and Jericho Hill, as well.

As your company and its portfolio has expanded over the years, how difficult is it to stay current and stay relevant in an ever evolving industry?

I think that evolution is key in business and absolutely necessary to grow as a human being. If you don’t evolve you will get passed by. That said, evolution is a byproduct of my desire to continually create. Ideas are constantly coming to me—whether it’s for a cigar blend or brand, clothing, design—it’s hard for me to shut it off. I will say that I have no desire to ‘stay current’ within the industry. I don’t really pay a lot of attention to what others are doing, nor do I find my inspiration from inside the industry. I think if you have to find your inspiration from your competitors, you’ll always be just chasing. I prefer to draw my inspiration from areas outside of the cigar business.

While your work has always been praised, the last few years have seen you reach new heights with the projects you have worked on with Luciano and Tabacalera Pichardo...how did that relationship first start?

my mind immediately went back to that notebook and the Mother Church idea. Mother Church is a nickname for the Ryman Auditorium here in Nashville. The concept was always to do a Churchill vitola and the packaging concept was heavily inspired by the Ryman. I'd had the blend on my desk since the prior year and I'd kept it as a 'pocket blend' waiting for the right opportunity. We reworked the blend into a Churchill (7" x 48) vitola and as soon as I smoked it I knew we had something amazing.

Where do you think Mother Church stacks up against the other cigars in your portfolio?

I personally believe that Mother Church was one of the best cigars we released in 2021. It's just such a unique blend and I think that Corajo 99 wrapper and Broadleaf (CT) binder really play well together. I knew my opinion was validated when Nick Libretti described the blend as "Illusione-esque." Being a big fan of Dion and the Illusione portfolio, I took that as a huge compliment.

This is the generic question we always have to ask, but in this day and age of collaboration, is there anyone you haven't worked with yet that you would like to?

I have to say that I think the word "collaboration" is so entirely over-used in our industry and it makes my skin crawl whenever I hear it—especially when someone shortens it to "collab." I can count the number of true collaborations in this industry over the last decade on one hand. Most often when people throw around "collaboration" it really is nothing more than a contract brand, i.e., a brand owner validates a blend that the factory puts together. Period. End. Now if you asked me if there's any other factories in the game I'd like to work with I'd say that we are currently so grateful to work with some of the best in the industry: Tabacalera La Alianza, My Father Cigars, Tabacalera Pichardo, and La Gran Fabrica Drew Estate. That said, as a creative I can never put myself in a box and close the lid.

Are there any upcoming projects or line extensions you can tell us about?

While I can't really let the cat out of the proverbial bag, what I can say is that 2022 is shaping up to be our most productive year yet, not only in terms of widening our distribution reach with our regular production brands, but also on the limited release front, as well. In addition to a new regular production slated for a PCA (July) launch, we've also got another dozen plus limited releases on the production schedule for this coming year. Stay tuned.

If you could give some quick advice to a new cigar enthusiasts, what would that be?

I think now is an exciting time to be a new cigar enthusiast. There is so much information readily available via online and social media, and the quality of domestic (non-Cuban) cigars has never been better. My advice would be to self-educate as much as you can and, more importantly, sample-sample-sample. Get your hands on as many different cigars and vitolas as you can and start educating your palate. By that I'm not suggesting you sit in a corner and try to discern "notes of cinnamon or burnt popcorn or cereal milk." What I am suggesting is explore and discover what your personal preferences are, and then go back and learn about the tobaccos in those particular cigars. Bottom line is "smoke what you like," hopefully that will include some Crowned Heads cigars. ●

