

"I'M 110 PERCENT SURE THAT MY ALBUM IS GOING TO BE NUTS, LIKE CHANGE-THE-GAME."

Mike Posner, singer, songwriter and producer

# One beat away from fame

## Mike Posner of Southfield sits on a record deal as he finishes his senior year at Duke

BY ADAM GRAHAM  
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**M**ike Posner is not your average college senior.

While this year's graduating class faces harsh economic times and an uncertain job market, by the time this Southfield native dons his graduation cap and gown at Duke University this spring, he will be well on his way to a successful career in pop music.

And while many of his fellow Class of 2010 grads are bellying up to the campus bar, soaking up the good times with their buddies before entering the real world, Posner is spending his weekends touring the country, playing college campuses coast to coast.

Talk about pomp and circumstance.

Over the summer, Posner (pronounced "Pose-ner") signed a record contract with J Records, home to Whitney Houston, Jamie Foxx, Jennifer Hudson and more. The deal came after his debut mixtape, "A Matter of Time," sparked an industry bidding war and made the singer, songwriter and producer a highly sought-after new property.

Seated in the musty basement of his parents' Southfield home the day before returning to Duke (where he's studying sociology and business), he isn't the least bit concerned that he's barely begun packing. Not that school is an afterthought, but he's focused on what lies ahead.

"Going back to school with a record deal is going to be interesting," says Posner, who radiates a cool calm and is almost disarmingly friendly. He's dressed in a purple henley shirt and jeans, and has a scruffy beard that makes him look not unlike Justin Timberlake.

Posner — friends call him "Pose" — is used to balancing music with academics. During finals week last school year, he was taking meetings with record labels in New York. One night while in the midst of writing a 20-page paper, he received an offer from a prominent industry powerhouse via e-mail.

"It was just glaring me in my face," says Posner, 21, sipping lightly from a small glass of orange juice. "I was sitting there, reading the numbers — then I had to write 10 more pages."

This school year is even more hectic. In addition to his class load, he's working on new music — he's expected to release another mixtape next month — and playing shows every weekend. He recently shot a video for his single "Drug Dealer Girl" on Duke's campus, not long after getting out of Image of Difference, his class on race, gender and sexuality in media.

Posner probably doesn't *need* to finish school, but it is easier to graduate than to face upsetting his mother. Plus, he's savvy enough to know that going back to school while sitting on a record deal makes for a pretty good story.

Peter Edge, president of A&R at J Records/RCA, calls Posner a "self-motivating dynamo. Some people are just made to be self-starters,

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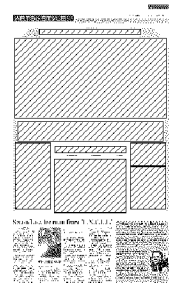
**and he's the epitome of one."**

**Edge, who has worked with artists such as Alicia Keys and Dido, says Posner — with his uniquely scratchy vocals, which sound like he's been chain-smoking and sucking on helium balloons — represents a new breed of pop artist.**

**"He's hip-hop, he's soulful, he's singer-songwriter, but in his melodies and sensibilities, it's all funneled through popular music," he says. "It all gets mashed together in today's mainstream."**

### Driven to succeed

**Posner was born in Detroit and lived there until his parents — Dad is a prominent criminal defense attorney in Detroit and Mom is a pharmacist — moved to Southfield, sending him and his sister to Birmingham schools. Grades were never an issue for Posner, who graduated from Groves High**



School with a better-than-perfect 4.4 grade-point average. Duke was alluring because it offered an escape from the grayness of Michigan winters.

In fifth grade, Posner began playing drums and learned how to read music. He was producing beats by the time he was in middle school. In high school, he was soaking up music by everyone from Miles Davis to Led Zeppelin to Rage Against the Machine to OutKast.

After a stint working at Detroit hip-hop station WHTD-FM (102.7), he spent the summer after his sophomore year in New York shopping beats to record labels. While working as an intern at independent hip-hop record label Definitive Jux, Posner took meetings with several labels but came up empty-handed. He says the rejection didn't discourage him — "I was more motivated than ever," he says.

When he returned to school he recorded every night after classes, putting himself on a body clock he now calls "totally terrible." While he was grinding away, his friends didn't understand why he wasn't hanging out and enjoying college life.

"They were making fun of me," he says. "My 21st birthday happened on a Friday or a Saturday, and I was working, and they were like, 'What are you doing?' I was like, 'You'll see.' And I think they can see now."

Posner finished his 12-song mixtape, and by exploiting a loophole in iTunes' podcast software that allows professors to send their lectures out to students, was able to give it away for free. It was released at the end of February.

"I baffled the whole music industry," says Posner, who wanted the album to be available for free to everyone, not just net-savvy blogger types. "I totally outsmarted everyone."

## Confidence and influences

"A Matter of Time" — which includes a reworking of Beyoncé's "Halo,"

and is hosted by influential hip-hop DJ Don Cannon — was available on iTunes for six months and logged an estimated 50,000 downloads, until J pulled the album in August. The company is planning to make some of the songs available again, but for a price.

Now Posner is focused on his album, which he discusses with a Kanye West-like confidence. "There's a lot of things I'm uncertain about in this world, writing hit songs is not one of them," he says. "I'm 110 percent sure that my album is going to be nuts, like change-the-game. I'm trying to make 'Thriller,' and when I say 'trying,' I mean I *am* making 'Thriller.'"

One fan he has in his corner is Detroit rapper Big Sean, a frequent tour-mate and collaborator who's featured on three songs on "A Matter of Time."

"I think he's going to be one of the biggest artists of all-time," says Sean, who is signed to Kanye West's GOOD Music label. "He's so unique, nobody does what he does. People do pop music, but he does it with an edge of hip-hop to it. He's in competition with no one, there's nobody that sounds like Mike Posner. He's found his lane and he's taking off in it."

Posner — who reads Sylvia Plath in his downtime and has a quote from Steven Pressfield's "The War of Art" taped to the wall of his basement studio — says he looks up to artists whose careers have had time to play out: Paul Simon, Elton John, Led Zeppelin, Jay-Z. And with the tools he has in place, he hopes to — make that plans to — one day join their ranks.

"People are going to respect me as a producer, musician and songwriter," says Posner. "In the end, I wanna be — I'm going to be — one of the biggest pop stars in the world."

First up? Philosophy of Sport, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1:15.

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Mike Posner performs at Studio 4 in Ann Arbor on a recent Friday night. A mixtape he made led to a bidding war by record labels. Posner makes pop with a hip-hop edge.

Madalyn Ruggiero / Special to The Detroit News



Adam Graham / The Detroit News

Working in the basement of his parents' Southfield home, Posner recorded much of the material that earned him his record deal. He was signed to J Records, home to Whitney Houston and Jamie Foxx.



Madalyn Ruggiero / Special to The Detroit News

While his friends at Duke University were partying, Posner worked on his music.