

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and local legends and offer some keen insight into how they see themselves and more importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where former interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, nationally renowned sports writers, heads of business concerns, community activists, and developers. Today our guest is the President and CEO of Maker's Mark Bill Samuels Jr. Probably needs little to no introduction but I'm going to read a bit of his bio and some a little bit of brief family history. It is nothing short of eclectic and possibly eccentric but it is quite a ride buckle in and here we go. He was born in Bardstown, Kentucky and educated as an engineer, physicist and lawyer. This former rocket scientist was fired for incompetence in 1964 as a design engineer for Aerial Jet General in Sacramento. But it was his seventh generation bourbon maker roots made it all but inevitable that he was predestined to led Maker's Mark.

He joined Maker's Mark Distillery Incorporated in 1967 and in 1975 he became president and CEO of Maker's Mark. And for those of you who may not know what Maker's Mark is, I don't know who that would be, but it is a hand crafted small batch type of bourbon whiskey distilled in Loretto, Kentucky and bottled at 90 proof in the United States. Little known fact unlike most Bourbons, Maker's Mark is not aged for any specific period of years/ Rather it is bottled and marketed when the expert tasters agree that it is ready. But it was in 1980 flying beneath the radar while building a loyal customer base the company stormed into the national consciousness after are being featured in a front page story for The Wall Street Journal.

Phones have been ringing off the hook ever since and Samuels is well known for his unconventional irreverent advertising which has propelled his smooth tasting bourbon into households around the globe and kept the customer coming back for more. It was in that same year the entire Maker's Mark Distillery was designated as a national landmark. And today Maker's Mark is recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as America's oldest if not smallest currently operating distillery in the nation. Let me go on, Maker's Mark enjoys something of a cult status in certain circles. For years it used to be marketed with the tagline quote "it taste expensive and is." And get this one, it allegedly is one of the favorite alcoholic beverages of Cuban President Fidel Castro. And Maker's Mark hold the 77 percent share of the US fine bourbon market but it's the backstory of what we now know of Maker's Mark that is nothing short of being legendary while being a bit comical. Allow me to speak a little bit to Bill's family history. Marge Samuels, Bill's mother, designed the bottle and named the whiskey. As a fine pewter collector she had always searched for quote "the mark of the maker." She was always a collector of bottles of cognac many of which were sealed in colorful wax.

When Bill Samuel Sr., Bill's father, in the sixth generation Kentucky distiller burned the family's 160 old bourbon recipe in 1953 the bourbon formula flamed out of control, catching his sister's hair on fire. And the only fight that Bill can remember between his mother and father came in 1958 when Bill's mom decided that dad's new whiskey now named Maker's Mark needed to have the neck of each bottle dipped in red sealing wax. Dad said it was too impractical, needless to say mom won. So it was in 1958 so in an unusually shaped squarish bottle the first bottle of Maker's Mark was dipped, sealed and introduced at \$7 a bottle. I don't even think today you could get a shot at \$7 but I digress. In addition to the distillery in Loretto, Kentucky there is also a Maker's Mark Bourbon House and Lounge located in the 4th Street Live entertainment complex in downtown Louisville.

That lounge opened in October 2004 with the grand opening of that complex along with many colleagues attended that grand opening with Bill Samuels to a truly beautiful evening of bourbon

and camaraderie. And the lounge itself has developed quite a following ever since decorated with backlit Makers Mark bottles and the traditional Maker's Mark wax dripping from the ceiling. More back to our guest today. In 1995 and 2005 Samuels was chosen Kentucky Entrepreneur of the Year. And selected as Louisville's 2004 Citizen of the Year and Harvard Lampoon's Man of the Year in 2005. He's chair of the Board of Trustees at Bellarmine, the president's advisory board of Clemson, is chairman of the board of the GOI and he's been the past chair of the University of Louisville trustees.

There's multiple other boards too numerous to mention. And wow what a bio and what a family history. It's truly an honor to have you here Bill on Leadership Landscape.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well thanks. I can go home now. There is nothing for me to say, Lord have mercy.

Kirt Jacobs: Nothing to say.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Just don't put all that on my tombstone.

Kirt Jacobs: OK I won't do it. I won't do it. What drives you to do what you do? to stay the course with the family business.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well I think I think the the driving part I think it's the DNA. It's the way I'm wired. And I see that in a lot of people. I see it in and in my grandchildren. I can tell when they get big enough to make their own decisions look out. So it's just. It's just kind of the way I am. If I don't enjoy leisure for the sake of leisure. I enjoy accomplishments. So when it's not business I really enjoy digging into a community project or community issue or somewhere. Some way that's got a beginning and the end and an outcome. So it's just the way I'm wired.

Kirt Jacobs: So would you say you're one of those guys that rarely says no when asked or...

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well I do to Kentuckians because Kentucky has been so important to us and so good to us. Because when Dad

started this hobby of his it had no chance of success. It hadn't been for Kentuckians sort of embracing this idea of good tasting bourbon We'd have never had a chance to get lucky later on. So yeah and when it's when somebody says come help me and it's a Kentuckian I'm there.

Kirt Jacobs: It's a great answer. Whom do you credit most influential in your life Bill? It can be one than one person.

Bill Samuels Jr.: I had the best mentors of anybody who's ever live. I started out with Jim Beam. You say well that's a competitor. That was that that was just he was a he was a legend but he was a he was a great friend of my grandfathers and my dad's and me. He loved children and I had to be the only child on the block. So I got most of his time. As I got... The day I got my driver's license I became Harland Sanders chauffeur.

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Bill Samuels Jr.: Unpaid but I did get to watch him and this was this was before he had any restaurants. My job was to put the little menu clip ons the establishment that were already in existence in for a nickel a chicken. ...taking here is his process his pressure cooker that he would install it in the kitchen. So I got to spend the whole summer with him and and we became fast friends. And then of course I had my father one of the legends of the distilling industry and then the man that after I got through law school made me come back and spend one summer with dad was another competitor. Hap Motlow the last member of the Jack Daniels family to run that distillery. I want to Vanderbilt their offices was directly across the street. I spent every Friday for three years with Hap and and he asked me to do one thing for him when I graduated. I was not going to do it. And that was go back and see if I could be of some assistance to dad. I said I owe it to you I'll do one year. And here we are 40 years later and I'm still stumbling and bumbling.

Kirt Jacobs: I don't know about that you've got an iconic brand here sitting in front of us thanks to that decision. What was the most defining moment of your life if you could name one? Profes-

sional or personal.

Bill Samuels Jr.: I don't think I think probably the most defining moment for the business. And the the most rewarding looking back over many years as you have with most fathers and sons they tend to be very different. Operating style, personality and dad and I were very different. And I think the defining moment was when I finally sat down and said Let's assume he's right. Let's just let's stop. Let's stop arguing with him. Let's assume he's right and then my job becomes let's see if we can figure out how to translate his emotions and his his instincts about how we ought to go to market. And and make it my job to translate his way. And then let's go. And what that did was that little simple idea really brought us together and it brought our respective strengths together because my strength is in the creative world but creative people tend to want to fight everybody. And once I got over that we got aligned on ideas. It was an absolutely beautiful relationship. I mean it never was a big fight but it just wasn't constructive.

Kirt Jacobs: I got you. If there is one Bill what is your biggest professional regret? In other words if you can armchair quarterback your life kind of hindsight 20/20 anything you might have done differently. Regrets a strong word.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well I.. I escaped a regret.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bill Samuels Jr.: Because I spent so much time in the business if it hadn't been for my wife being such an incredible nurturing parent and mother and wife. I would have regretted not spending as much time with the children. She compensated to such an absolutely unbelievable extent and we drug the kids in the family into as many the business situations as we could because basically we're in the entertainment business. And all the entertainment that we did to kids were always always there. Educationally for all this incredible education I was exposed to I really missed and still do miss not having a business degree. It's a deficiency. I'm about a C- in the finance area. Marketing area I'm a little bit better at because

it goes to my natural strengths.

Kirt Jacobs: You know that you're a heck of a spokesperson. I think it's safe observation.

Bill Samuels Jr.: If I get if I get old and stay sane I really am thinking of that going to business school. You know even as an old person just for the fascination of it. That's that's the one thing I really missed.

Kirt Jacobs: That would be an interesting that day I'm sure.

Bill Samuels Jr.: I'll go harassed J. McGowan over at Bellarmine.

Kirt Jacobs: On the flip side of that Bill what is your biggest professional triumph? If you can name one. Doesn't have to be just one.

Bill Samuels Jr.: I just don't think I've had too many. We remember we've only done one thing at and I get... I get reminded every so often about how limited our family is that we've never done anything except make and sell whiskey for 220 year.

Kirt Jacobs: That is something though.

Bill Samuels Jr.: That is. That's defining.

Kirt Jacobs: In Kentucky that is a big deal.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well it's a bigger deal here than it is most places and it's really great to see so much interest in what we do and what the other bourbon distilleries do around the world. I mean I was overwhelmed his week in Germany to find the kind of interest. But I would say probably the one either got lucky or got it right. Was after that Wall Street Journal article which was enormous as far as taking Maker's beyond the Kentucky borders. And instinctively I knew that that was just the beginning it was not the end that that article was a door if we had enough sense to figure out how to use it. And and I got all over that with my friend Jim Lynd-

sey who was the executive vice president Dow Anderson. The two of us drove that leverage that incredible opportunity that we had into the real foundation of trying to build a national brand.

Kirt Jacobs: Did you instigate the Wall Street Journal or did they seek

Bill Samuels Jr.: Pretty much reacted it pretty much reacted. The problem I had with the Journal was that dad didn't like he didn't like marketers for one thing. And he didn't like the press. He only did two interviews in his whole life. I kind of had to trick him into both those. So when this journalist from The Wall Street Journal said he would like to go to the distillery I knew what he needed to do he never said it was he needed to spend time with my father because he was the creator and I knew I couldn't tell dad what I was about to impose on him. So I told him I had a friend of mine that would like to meet him knowing that being the gentleman that he was he would allow things to go and then when the guy left he'd kill me.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a great story.

Bill Samuels Jr.: Yeah that's what made the difference. To taking it from from a hobby to an American icon. That was the moment.

Kirt Jacobs.: What do you find exciting about doing all of this?

Bill Samuels Jr.: You know I don't know but it sure is.

Kirt Jacobs: It's never dull. You're always where the action is I mean it with regards to Maker's Mark...

Bill Samuels Jr.: Well it's it's a little bit my nature not to sit down. But not gosh how could you ever have a better a better business situation. Where forget the money part of it. Just you know here we are we we do we do something with our hands. We create something. And we get applause from so many people. It's it's just wonderful.

Kirt Jacobs: And it's catching on internationally.

Bill Samuels Jr: It's catching on international. We've got a young team at the company. And my son's comeback and he's helping or he's he's working hard with the international development piece of it. And we've got five or six just indispensable young people so when when I go off to the nursing home shortly they are ready.

Kirt Jacobs: I don't think you are going any time soon. What is your favorite word Bill? If you had one. Do you have a favorite word?

Bill Samuels Jr: Yeah but I couldn't repeat it right now.

Kirt Jacobs: Well that's true...

Bill Samuels Jr: Creative people tend to be blunt and obsessive and all those kinds of things. I would say right at this moment it would have to be Go Cards.

Kirt Jacobs: Go Cards. All right that's a good one. We will go with that. This show's about leadership. Can you define leadership in one word? Can be more than one.

Bill Samuels Jr: Leaders line up to participate and follow. Now operating style that lining people up has to be done with the idea not with my ability and my interpersonal skills to cause them to willing.. Like I would be a terrible army captain. OK. I would be a terrible sales manager where you line people up... you know make the big enthusiastic speech get them lined up. So I was fortunate to have people tell me about my limitations so I didn't waste a lot of time trying to be good at something I never was going to be very good at it. But I happen to have the ability to move laterally thinking wise to connect dots that otherwise are not obvious to folks. And that's exactly what the company needed. When I came in we needed some way to differentiate we needed some way to really just see and march toward a different future from the industry from Bourbon. It's all reconverge but back in the 60's that there wasn't

any idea that would happen. And so fortunately we we were able to put me in my position which was to provide creative leadership and then we built an organization around my shortcomings which are the interpersonal skills. The lack of management sans the fact that I am dyslexic and have a horrible time reading....

Kirt Jacobs: I'd never notice that.

Bill Samuels Jr: and guiding a car. You know I'm supposed to be over here i'm just as liable to be in the opposite direction. But yeah that's this just having access to a resource that could help me push my energies toward something the company needed desperately at that point in time. And protected me from myself as a lousy to mediocre manager and to build a front line team that had those skills. I mean we've got a we've got a production vice president could have been a sales manager with any company in the in the world. We've got a family instructor can actually talk. All that was very strategically put in place.

Kirt Jacobs: I got you. I got you. If you could change one thing Bill be it in your own life or in general what would that be? Can be a large scale question or small scale.

Bill Samuels Jr: it would be, it would be... the one thing that if I could tweak my nose and change it would be Louisville's resistance to risk.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Bill Samuels Jr: As a community as a people. It's holding us back something terrible. We are so afraid to make a mistake.

Kirt Jacobs: And you've served on the task force and you know we've got the arena coming the various things what what do you think is different now than 10 or 20 years ago?

Bill Samuels Jr: This isn't arena driven.

Kirt Jacobs: No no. I know.

Bill Samuels Jr: The main thing that's different is when I was a kid and used to come with dad to the bank and watch them guide the community. If you get six six seven people that were making all the decisions. We don't have anymore. And that's a good thing and I think with the arena and with everything that is going on in downtown or we hope it goes on...

Kirt Jacobs: Good point.

Bill Samuels Jr: Certainly the bridges are just a huge issue right now. We've got young people young people that are disconnected with with the kind of genealogy that I come from that are first generation Louisvillians and are making a huge impact in the community. So I think we've got a chance but we have a legacy. We've missed so many opportunities to propel the city into the 21st century and we just managed to stumble and stumble. And I think we've got great political leadership so I don't blame that. I think it's. I think it's us. We have found the enemy and it is us and I think and I think we're slowly overcoming it.

Kirt Jacobs: You put a creative spin on it. I like that. Could you describe in detail a particular incident or scenario in your professional or personal life where you utilize the style and philosophy on leadership. You may have already kind of touched upon it. Your shortcomings if you will.

Bill Samuels Jr: The main the main thing in getting these insights into why I was never going to be an effective manager was to stay away from stay away from volatile situations. Stay away from... organize the business around having the maximum amount of people report to other people that are better at managing and responding to the needs of our people because I really do. I mean there's no way in a world that wants folks to get along and to go but I just I just don't have the the instincts to pick up on a lot of that so so I think staying out of situations and staying in my zone.

Kirt Jacobs: Comfort zone? It's not that is it.

Bill Samuels Jr: I No. It's not a comfort zone just the opposite. I like an uncomfort zone. That's my problem.

Kirt Jacobs: I got you. You kind of touched upon this a few moments ago. Do you think there's a difference today in our leaders than there was in past generations? And that can be in the bourbon industry, can be in business, it can be in anything. What do you think is maybe different now than when you took over the business...

Bill Samuels Jr: I think there's one huge difference. The command and control type of entrepreneur...

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bill Samuels Jr: ...is having a harder time getting other people to follow. And we're seeing the the best leaders in business the best leaders in politics is being much more collaborative.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bill Samuels Jr: It's it's a huge difference.

Kirt Jacobs: Is that a good or bad thing or is it just a different in style?

Bill Samuels Jr: That's a good question. It's a huge difference in style and I'd like to think it's a good thing. But we do miss something because when something is invisible or not obvious it generally takes the you know... Knock the committee apart and let's get the one person that may not have more visions but is a whole lot willing to take a risk and really believes that they're right even though it's counterintuitive to everybody else in the in the city or in the world. So I don't think there's a right and wrong.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bill Samuels Jr: I think probably what we need from time to time we need a dose of both.

Kirt Jacobs: That's true I see where you're coming from on that. This is a question we like to ask of course you're the world traveler you know working on the brand of Maker's Mark. If you were granted two weeks right today. No obligation. No Blackberry no cell phone, e-mail. No commitments whatsoever. How would you spend those two weeks?

Bill Samuels Jr: I'd spend it working for the community.

Kirt Jacobs: Would you?

Bill Samuels Jr: Oh absolutely. That's my favorite thing and to see after all the frustration not to any of us in the business community had much to do with it but it's nice to see the momentum it's nice to see people get excited about change. It's nice to see it's nice to see so darn much going on in town now.

Kirt Jacobs: What do you think has caused that? I'm going off a little tangent

Bill Samuels Jr: Well I'm I watch that. I was here...

Kirt Jacobs: That's why I bring it up.

Bill Samuels Jr: I was here when when Wilson Wyatt shut down Fourth street. OK. And that was a great day. We were going to have a mall in downtown Louisville. That was the beginning of the end. That was a bad thing. I'm not sure if it would have survived as a shopping area anyway. But of course residential left, the interstate cut the city in two and I think up until recently there wasn't much confidence that our downtown had a chance. And clearly we have been fortunate with our political leadership. Jerry Abramson has been magnificent. Dave Armstrong is a huge under sung hero in all this because he brought Cordish in.

Kirt Jacobs: It's true.

Bill Samuels Jr: Cordish doesn't play in sandboxes this small.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a good analogy. It's very true.

Bill Samuels Jr: If Cordish did nothing it gave us the confidence to say wow look what we can do. And I think it was that it was the right thing with this 4th Street Live and that's just the beginning. There is so much more in the works and it's so exciting but somebody somebody had to convince us. After all these years of trying to push the peanuts up the hill downtown and having not much to show for it. And there's a lot of people invested an awful lot of money down on Main Street. It was small businesses a lot of sweat. Now they were making. I mean they were making progress there's no question about it but 4th Street really put Louisville on the map.

Kirt Jacobs: It did. An now we have all the loft development now.

Bill Samuels Jr: It's just very brilliant. I would also say the baseball field.

Kirt Jacobs: True. Slugger Field

Bill Samuels Jr: Certainly Jerry Abramson had.. I mean that was his baby and just look what happened around that. And I'll be honest I think because of the success of that the neighborhood around Slugger Field really helped with the naysayers in bringing the arena to Louisville.

Kirt Jacobs: That's true and you know you've got Glass Works you can go on and on. It all kicked off there. More towards your particular industry. Do you see that from the leadership within the industry of bourbon or distilled spirits do you see any of that has changed over the years?

Bill Samuels Jr: Oh my gosh

Kirt Jacobs: Want to get your take on that because you really are the first the top guys in it.

Bill Samuels Jr: Well we've got a we've got a great industry. And

you've got a great company here in Louisville with Brown Forman. They do so much under the radar screen people don't see it's almost embarrassing. And they're a great partner for what we're trying to do as are the other distilleries. Bourbon is what Kentucky is being recognized for now. Kentucky Fried Chicken, bourbon whiskey and it's I mean I have spent an enormous amount of time traveling the last three or four months and desperate places where I can't sleep and all of this. I am I mean I'm amazed. Bourbon is on the threshold of being in equal to malt whisky and all of the wonderful watering holes all around the world. It's just huge

Kirt Jacobs: Wow.

Bill Samuels Jr: And it's not just Maker's it's all the distilleries are participating in this phenomenon which really gives us the energy collectively to make it happen.

Kirt Jacobs: This is a question that we ask our guests young or old.

Bill Samuels Jr: I'd be old.

Kirt Jacobs: I didn't say that Bill. When the great day comes when you know how do you want to be remembered God forbid you walk out of here something tragic happens on the way back to the office or what have you. how would you like to be remembered?

Bill Samuels Jr: Well up until my grandchildren were born I would have been I would have been satisfied for the contributions to the industry and the company but those little grandbabies have to have have changed things for me. I don't remember going through this this rebirth of excitement when my children were born maybe because I was so young. And I wasn't thinking about mortality at that time and I've heard this from a lot of people. I didn't believe it. When you have your own grandchildren things come into focus.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bill Samuels Jr: And and it's really done that for me how blessed we are. How blessed I am to have a wife that was able almost by

herself to raise these children to be such great parents themselves. I mean it's that that's that's a big deal.

Kirt Jacobs: It is a big deal.

Bill Samuels Jr: I think I guess you could say well he didn't screw it up.

Kirt Jacobs: I can see you didn't do that. Anything you elevated it. Family history and the iconic brand.

Bill Samuels Jr: Oh I think I've made a contribution to the brand stuff and I love the community this it's just a it's a good place it's an easy place to participate. You don't see that not invented here mentality like you do in a lot of places. If you willing to roll up your sleeves and help there's nobody cares too much about how many merit badges you got. They just jump in to help us.

Kirt Jacobs: I'm going to reach up and grab this bottle of bourbon. I was an Ambassador and I was there back in April 2003 and my sordid past and I actually dipped this bottle and it was quite..

Bill Samuels Jr: I give you know. I give you about an A-. You used a little too much wax. I'm going to have to charge you for it.

Kirt Jacobs: Oh man. That's just wrong. I didn't know I know there was a committee.

Bill Samuels Jr: There is a quota

Kirt Jacobs: Sir I.. Bourbon on a government channel that is kind of tawdry. I really appreciate having you...

Bill Samuels Jr: Oh thanks.

Kirt Jacobs: ...on Leadership Landscape Bill. It is truly an honor to have you here

Bill Samuels Jr: My pleasure

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com