

Rob Hill:

Juggling Several Careers

By Robin Roenker

Rob Hill is one of those people who has a knack for having the right ideas at the right times — and the smarts to know how to bring them to fruition.

When he decided to write his first book, *“Savannah Squares,”* a tourist guide to Savannah’s noted architecture and public monuments, an editor called him back within hours of his e-mail pitch. She’d been looking for a book exactly like the one he’d proposed.

When he called Wire Image, a leading stock photo agency, to ask if they’d be interested in hiring him to shoot celebrity photos in Nashville, he learned that they’d just launched a sister company, Film Magic, that was seeking a photographer in the area. A month later, he was on the red carpet, shooting the Country Music Awards — an event he’s covered yearly since 2004.

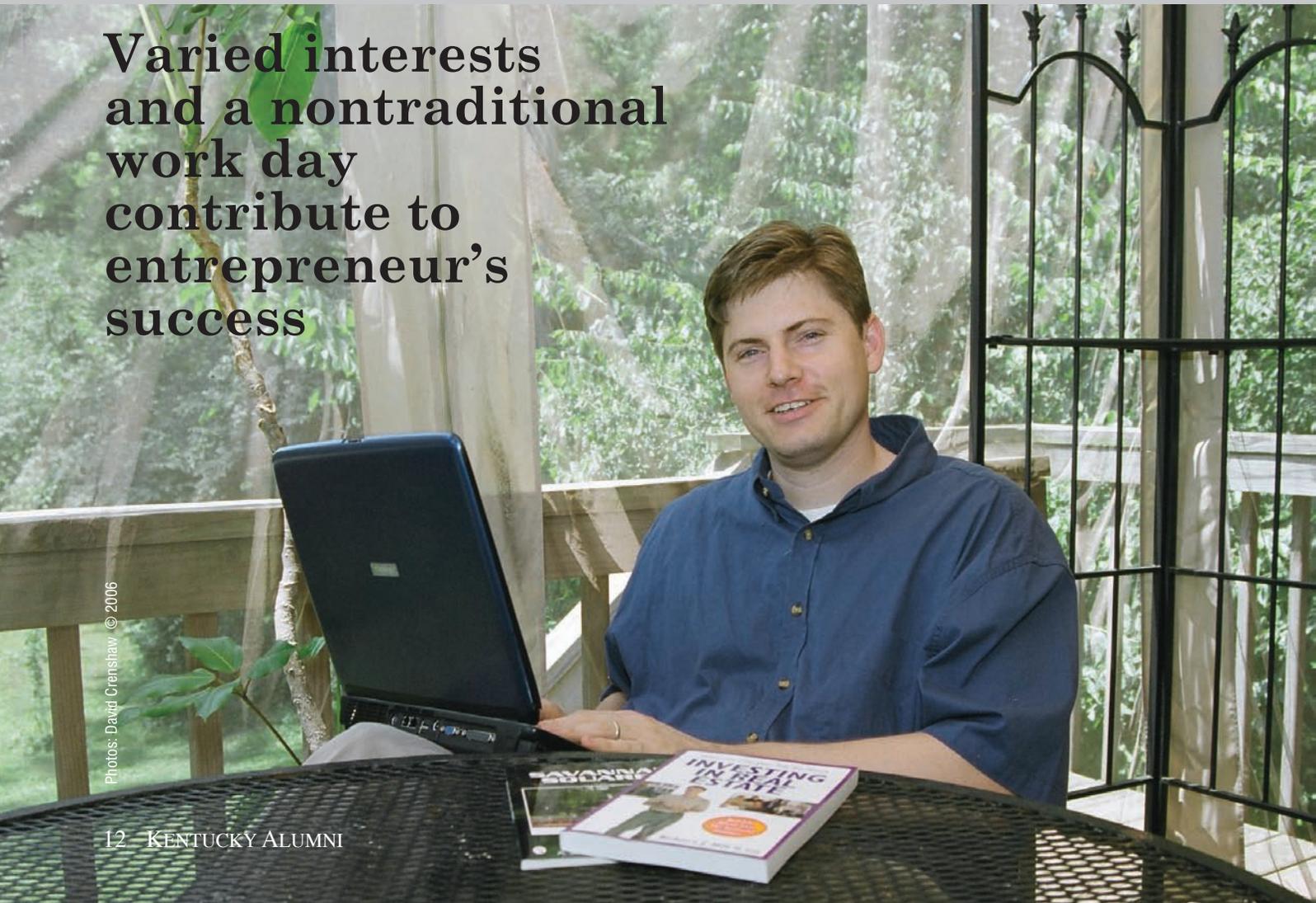
For Hill, a Louisville native and 1999 graduate of the UK College of Law, it’s all about an old adage. “Timing — also known as luck — is everything,” he says.

Hill’s varied successes since leaving UK — from lucrative stints freelancing as a real estate attorney in Georgia, to publication of a second book, *“What No One Ever Tells You About Investing in Real Estate,”* to the launch of his own media relations firm, Harpring Hill Media — make plain there’s more to Hill’s story than pure luck.

“Rob is the ultimate entrepreneur,” says Travis Young, a member of The Blind Corn Liquor Pickers, a Lexington-based bluegrass band represented by Hill’s Harpring Hill Media. “He has his hands in a million pies, and they’re all very creative. And he’s successful at it because he’s such a genuine guy.”

**Varied interests
and a nontraditional
work day
contribute to
entrepreneur’s
success**

Photos: David Crenshaw © 2006



Setting His Own Course

Now living in Nashville with his wife, Amber, and new son, Truman, Hill works out of his home office, happily self-employed and tackling the mélange of pursuits that color his career.

After completing law school, Hill moved to Atlanta, attracted by the tech boom there and his interest in patent and trademark copyright law. In no time, with the help of a personal connection, Hill was hired as assistant to the general counsel at Radiant Systems, which developed cash register monitoring systems utilized by many gas stations and movie theaters throughout the country. Hill helped the company's software engineers develop patents based on their new products. It was, in plain terms, his "dream job," he says. But, it didn't last. Six months into the position his department folded, a victim of the dot.com and tech crash in early 2000.

After that, Hill switched gears, moving from intellectual property and patent law to real estate law in order to help his uncle, a real estate mortgage broker in Atlanta. The area of speciality came naturally to Hill, who grew up in a family of real estate investors and who now owns some investment properties of his own.

Having found success as a freelance attorney help-

novation think tank, and one part mediation center, Hill hopes the project — which has him collaborating with two Vanderbilt business professors — will offer Nashville-area business and technology gurus a space to come and incubate their ideas and then turn them into real, marketable products.

"It will have stuff to break you out of the mold and be creative — bright primary colors, games, Play-Doh. Things to get you to ask questions in different ways," Hill explains. Centers like the one Hill's proposing already exist throughout the country, in cities such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, Ann Arbor, and Louisville. Hill hopes to finalize his business plan for adding one to Nashville's landscape by the end of this year.

"Rob has lots of great ideas, and it's exciting to have him come to Owen (Vanderbilt University's business school). He's someone to bounce ideas off of, and a wonderful intellectual collaborator," says David Owens, Clinical Professor of Management at Vanderbilt and one of Hill's intended partners on the inspiration station project.

Also on Hill's drawing board are plans to begin filming a documentary next spring about Savannah, which will detail the history of the city and its evolution into one of America's premier vacation and retirement communities. Hill is serving as producer on the project.

"I honestly don't think I could do just one thing."

ing with real estate closings throughout Georgia, Hill considered opening his own real estate law firm in Savannah, where he and Amber lived for a few years. But in 2003 the family moved to Nashville, where his parents and younger brother, Mark, had settled. There, Hill's parents, still active investors, introduced him to membership in the Real Estate Investors of Nashville — the group that inspired Hill to write his second book, detailing true stories of the ups and downs of real estate investment.

Since moving to Music City, Hill has sidelined his legal practice a bit (he gained license to practice in Tennessee only earlier this year) in order to focus on his many other interests.

In addition to running his media company and freelance photography business, he's currently pursuing an MBA at Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management and working on two more books — another on real estate issues and one detailing his experiences in business school.

He's also got plans in the works to launch what he's tentatively calling an "Inspiration Station." One part in-

While his schedule is admittedly "chaotic," he wouldn't have it any other way. "I honestly don't think I could do just one thing," Hill admits. Four months working in a traditional law firm setting in Georgia — with its "politics and micromanagement" — was enough to let Hill know it wasn't for him.

Since becoming a new father, Hill says he's been trying to cut down on some of his projects. But it doesn't come naturally to him. "I make things complex, I know. I enjoy it that way, I guess. It's just hard to simplify because I have so many things that intrigue me," he says.

So for now, it's sleep he's more apt to give up, waking early to care for Truman to let his wife catch some shut-eye after staying up with the baby all night, and then turning to his PR work by midday and to his writing, roughly from 8 p.m. to 2 or 3 a.m.

The near-round-the-clock schedule is worth it, Hill says, because it lets him do what he loves best. "I've always been about creating things. I love making things and seeing things come to fruition," he says.

Making Things Happen

Hill attributes a lot of his success to the fact that he's "not afraid to ask the right questions at the right time. I don't mind opening my mouth," he explains.

Cases in point: When Hill met Robert Shemin, author of several real estate investment books, at a seminar, he didn't shy away from asking about his experiences in the field. The conversation eventually led to a contact with Shemin's editor, and Hill's second book deal. Same thing again when Hill connected with author Scott Turow at a Vanderbilt conference. Their chat led to Hill's being introduced to Turow's editor, who has a contract on one of Hill's forthcoming books.

And his self-taught foray into professional photography came after Hill asked a well-known Nashville musician, Buddy Miller (whom he had met when Miller purchased a home from his parents), if he could borrow Miller's semi-professional camera. Just like that, Miller handed over his camera and lenses, and Hill used them to establish a portfolio.

The photographic skill came easily to Hill, who has always been a totally visual person.

Since then, Hill's photographs of celebrities from Shania Twain to LeAnn Rimes to Maroon 5 in Nashville's music scene and of noted speakers like Condoleezza Rice and Laura Bush drawn to Vanderbilt University events have appeared in national publications like *Vanity Fair*, *People*, *Country Weekly*, and *Celebrity Living Weekly*.

Taking personality terms from a book he recently read, "*The Tipping Point*," Hill calls himself a "maven and a connector. I know a little about a lot of things,

Rob and Amber Hill with their son, Truman



and I know a lot of people," he says. "I've always been . . . a middle man trying to facilitate stuff."

Hill's keen networking skills have helped not only his own career pursuits but also those of his Harpring Hill media clients as well.

"Rob was able to get Bill VornDick, a huge music producer who's worked with people like Béla Fleck and Alison Krauss, to come out and hear us at the Bluegrass Inn," explains Young of The Blind Corn Liquor Pickers. "Here we were, a totally local band, with one CD that we'd put out as a garage effort on our own. And he got this huge name to come see us. Eventually VornDick signed us to a two-CD contract, and we've gotten to work with the finest engineers in Nashville," Young says.

Hill credits his family's unwavering support for his creative tendencies and less than orthodox work behavior for allowing him to accomplish so much at such a young age. But it seems as though there's something else at work behind his success: When Rob Hill puts his mind to something, he finds a way to get it done.

Take "*Savannah Squares*," his first book, which came about almost as a dare. He'd been itching to buy a digital camera while he and his wife were living in Savannah. When he finally forked over the \$450 to buy a then top-of-the-line four-megapixel camera, "Amber said, 'OK, you've got your camera, so what are you going to do with it?'" Hill recalls. And just like that, he said, "I think I'll write a book." Three and a half months later, "*Savannah Squares*" was complete, fulfilling his parents' predictions that their eldest son, who often had to be reprimanded to get his nose out of the books — would one day turn out to be a writer.

Hill credits UK Law professor Harold Weinberg for tightening and honing his writing style, the effects of having completed multiple revisions and redrafts of a 25-page legal research paper on trademark dilution law in Weinberg's class. "He really taught me to write logically and coherently, so I owe him a large debt of gratitude," Hill says.

Hill's one regret about his UK experience was that he didn't take advantage of UK's joint MBA-JD program. But at the time, he says, he didn't realize how interested in business he was to become.

Hill's self-described ups and downs in the business world since leaving Lexington have taught him to "never be afraid to ask questions" and to "always try to stay in touch with people you find interesting," he says. And he tries to learn as much from his one failed business experiment — an online real estate closing site that folded after the tech boom ruptured — as his many successful ones.

At the end of what are usually very long days, Hill finds himself happy and at the center of an entrepreneurial career that's as unique as his interests are diverse.

"I am lucky to be doing what I really want to do right now," he says. "I cannot imagine living my life without this kind of work."

Robin Roenker '98 AS is a freelance writer in Lexington.