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Country Fun: A Cultural History of Opryland USA, Nashville, and the Suburban South

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COUNTRY FUN: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF OPRYLAND USA, NASHVILLE, AND THE SUBURBAN SOUTH

by
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In memory of Frankie and John Prine,
two Nashvillians that we lost too early.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis centers around the history of Opryland USA, a theme park and "musical showplace" that existed from 1972 to 1997 in the suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. Using a variety of primary sources including park ephemera, newspaper articles, and songs, I show how, over its twenty-five years, Opryland *became* a country music theme park after initially presenting a seemingly diverse picture of American popular music. I reveal that, despite local businessowners' and musicians' reluctance to embrace Opryland at first, the park was accepted by many Nashvillians to the point where it is now nostalgically mourned. Then, putting those primary materials in conversation with secondary scholarship on twentieth-century southern history, this thesis connects the relatively unexplored story of Opryland to broader themes in modern southern history including suburbanization, the rise of the Christian Right, and questions of authenticity and distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected world.

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INTRODUCTION
Getting Out of Town: How Opryland Came to Be

The Grand Ole Opry was getting a new home. The Opry, an immensely popular radio program, had, since its founding in 1925, established Nashville as the center of the country music industry and its home, the Ryman Auditorium, as a pilgrimage site for country fans.[1] But this would soon change. That's what WSM, the famed Nashville radio station that ran the Opry, announced on Oct. 18, 1968 on the weekend of the second annual Country Music Association Awards. That night, some of the biggest country stars of the 1960s and '70s—Glen Campbell and Tammy Wynette, Jeannie C. Riley and Johnny Cash, Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton—took home honors at a ceremony held at the Ryman. But the announcement that the Opry was moving came in the morning, at a breakfast held at Municipal Auditorium, one of the several other entertainment venues in downtown Nashville.[2]

"Our feeling is that the Grand Ole Opry needs a new, modern facility," Irving Waugh, president of WSM, told *The Tennessean*. WSM explained to reporters that they were looking to place this new Opry House at the center of a "vast complex including hotels and an amusement park." This complex would require somewhere between 150 to

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[1] Richard Carlin, "Grand Ole Opry," *The Big Book of Country Music: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 183-185.
[2] Kathy Sawyer, "Campbell Cops CMA Top Awards," *The Tennessean*, October 19, 1968, 1-5, Tennessee Electronic Library; Albert Cason and John Haile, "Starday Buys King Records," *The Tennessean*, October 19, 1968, 1-5, Tennessee Electronic Library.

200 acres of land and WSM announced that they were working with a national consulting firm to determine where it would be possible to build such a massive facility. Though *The Tennessean* buried it 11 paragraphs deep in their front-page article, the most intriguing thing about Opryland was its location or, rather, where it would not be located. WSM explicitly said that Opryland would not be in Music Row, the downtown Nashville neighborhood that had been home to the country music industry for several decades.[3] No location was mentioned initially, but an editorial about an apparent Nashville growth spurt claimed "the new Opry center probably would have to be at some distance away from downtown."[4] In other words, Music City's biggest attraction was moving to the suburbs.

Throughout the 1960s, the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, WSM's parent company, ramped up pressure on the station to relocate the Opry. The radio station functioned as a public relations arm of the insurance company. National Life and Accident filtered decisions through the lens of how they would make themselves, the Opry, and the country music industry look. But there were also very real reasons that motivated WSM to move its iconic country music show out of the Ryman in downtown Nashville. Most concerning was the fact that the Ryman was quite literally a firetrap. The former church, originally called the Union Gospel Tabernacle, was completed in 1892 with the funding of boat captain Thomas Ryman who "got religion" at a Nashville tent revival and committed himself to evangelism and temperance.[5] In 1943, the brick and

[3] Cason and Haile, "Starday Buys King Records." An overview of Music Row's history can be found in chapter 2 of Jeremy Hill, *Country Comes to Town: The Music Industry and the Transformation of Nashville* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).
[4] "'Music City' Growing Fast," *The Tennessean*, October 19, 1968, 4, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[5] "When Captain Tom Ryman 'Got Religion,'" *The Tennessean*, July 13, 2014, https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/industries/music/2014/07/13/ryman-auditorium-history-thomas-ryman/12569715/.

wood building became the Opry's then-permanent home and eventually earned the endearing honor of being the "Mother Church of Country Music."[6] But the building's age was becoming worrisome. For decades, the Ryman's wooden floors had been buffed with oil, meaning that one misplaced cigarette could spell disaster. Concerns about the Ryman catching fire were so serious that WSM had connected with a church in nearby Madison, Tennessee, in case an emergency necessitated a space for the Opry's scheduled weekend performances.[7] The Nashville Fire Department even had a truck ready to go whenever groups performed at the Ryman.[8] According to E. W. "Bud" Wendell, the Opry's manager during the late '60s, many off-duty fire- and policemen worked as ticket sellers and ushers at the Ryman, helping to convince the fire marshal not to condemn the deteriorating venue as a fire hazard.[9]

Even if one could ignore the constant fear of death by fire, the Ryman wasn't a particularly comfortable place to perform or attend a show. The venue had no air conditioning and fans fainting from heat were so common that a makeshift first aid station was set up in Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, a bar accessible from the alley behind the Ryman. Before shows, performers trying to apply makeup, tune instruments, and wriggle into flashy costumes were jammed into dressing rooms the size of large closets.[10] Outside the venue, downtown parking was severely limited for out-of-town guests, many of whom had traveled hundreds of miles primarily to attend the Opry. And as the Ryman

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[6] John W. Rumble, "The Ryman Auditorium," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 443-445.
[7] E. W. "Bud" Wendell in discussion with the author, Jan. 15, 2020.
[8] Nate Rau, "40 Years After Near End, Ryman Growing," *The Tennessean*, July 11, 2014, https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/industries/music/2014/07/11/years-facing-demolition-ryman-poised-grow/12551953/.
[9] Wendell in discussion with the author.
[10] Ibid.

became solidified as a country music heritage site, more and more people continued coming to Nashville to see their favorite performers on the Opry stage. This resulted, as a photograph by J.T. Phillips for *The Tennessean* shows, in lines stretching longer and longer, wrapping around the Ryman and onto Broadway.[11] But WSM and Opry stars were also increasingly concerned about the optics of bringing thousands of country fans to the Lower Broadway neighborhood of downtown Nashville each weekend. The area around the Ryman was becoming a de facto red-light district. In the years shortly before and decades after the Opry moved, "if you went down Lower Broadway, there were pawnshops, there were peep shows and seedy pool halls" according to Nashville historian David Ewing.[12] This obviously contradicted the aims of WSM, which was angling to raise its brand profile by bringing tourists into Nashville to enjoy the Opry, and became one of the primary arguments that the company used to convince fans, residents, and Opry members that the move to Opryland was necessary.

However, as scholar Jeremy Hill argues in *Country Comes to Town: The Music Industry and the Transformation of Nashville*, WSM and the Opry exaggerated these local concerns and linked them to growing concerns among middle- and upper-class Americans about urban areas to gain popular support. As suburbanization and white flight occurred in cities across the U.S., the downtown spaces left behind became popularly imagined as places riddled by crime, violence, and poverty without acknowledging the process of abandonment occurring simultaneously. "Opry figures," Hill writes, "drew on a potent national discourse about urban space and railed against the

[11] This archival photograph is included in Rau, "40 Years After Near End."
[12] Quote from Lizzy Alfs and Nate Rau, "How Nashville's Honky-Tonk Barons Created an Empire," *The Tennessean*, June 1, 2018, https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/2018/06/01/nashville-honky-tonks-cma-fest-lower-broadway-tootsies/657157002/.

'slums' of downtown Nashville to argue that the Ryman's urban location was inappropriate for the Opry's family-oriented audience and image."[13] Business executives like G. Daniel Brooks and Irving Waugh, plus famous Opry performers such as Roy Acuff and Porter Wagoner, made the case for moving, painting a picture of a downtown Nashville "slum" full of vice, sexuality, and danger that threatened the Opry's values. The new Opryland, on the other hand, was all theirs—a family-friendly place that WSM could "protect" and "control."[14] A debate emerged within the Opry and the Nashville community about the prospect of the famed show leaving its longtime home for the suburbs. Despite anti-move cases about the Ryman's historic significance and the unpredictability of hosting the show right off Broadway, Opryland ultimately went ahead as planned.[15]

That controversy is where this project began. My research started in the archives of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville during the summer of 2019 when I held an internship there. When I first started looking through the archives, I was most interested in the Outlaw country movement of the 1970s and planned to center my thesis on that subgenre. However, thanks to an episode of Tyler Mahan Coe's podcast *Cocaine & Rhinestones* about Tom T. Hall, I learned about Opryland and the controversy over its creation. Some of Hall's opinions about the park featured on that podcast are

[13] Hill, *Country Comes to Town*, 77-78
[14] Ibid., 78-83.
[15] Ibid., 84-85

included later in this essay.[16] At the time, I was also reading a good bit about urban planning and suburbanization—which sparked my interest in the park.

As I combed through the Hall of Fame's file folder about Opryland, a pattern started to emerge: a wide gap between the way the park was presented in the 1970s and later in the 1990s. I looked through the whole file that summer, copied many materials, and took notes about others. I also joined an Opryland fan group on Facebook and have been following their posts over the past several months, which I discuss in this work's conclusion. When I returned to school in the fall, I did more research on the digital archive of *The Tennessean*, which helped fill in many details about the Opryland story and life in Nashville, and read secondary texts about country music, amusement parks, and southern culture in general. In January 2020, I returned to the Hall of Fame to interview E. W. "Bud" Wendell, a prominent figure in the history of Opryland and a Hall of Fame member. His willingness to talk about the park helped give perspective to many of the events and themes I was previously approaching solely through archival materials.

The following chapters are roughly chronological, tracking the history of Opryland from its opening in 1972 to its closing in 1997. However, this is not an exhaustive chronicle of the park's history or anything like that. Each chapter looks at its particular period of time through the lens of a select few themes. I had initially thought about organizing my research and analysis with thematic chapters but found that the major transformations at Opryland—from diverse America to "Country America," a suburban disgrace to Nashville institution—made the most sense when presented within the wholeness of the park's history.

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[16] Tyler Mahan Coe, "Harper Valley PTA, Part 3: Tom T. Hall," *Cocaine & Rhinestones*, podcast audio, Dec. 19, 2017, https://cocaineandrhinestones.com/tom-t-hall-harper-valley-pta.

The first of these chapters focuses on the park in the 1970s, introduces the park's geography and design, and engages with the historical themes of suburbanization, authenticity, and popular culture. Opryland during this period made two competing claims: that it was authentic (or "real," as its copywriters frequently wrote) and that it was a strictly controlled place. In this chapter, I attempt to untangle these dissonant claims and argue that the park was an answer to a problem unique to country music. During the 1970s, the genre was being pulled in politically and culturally opposite directions. The park served as a way to reconcile these contradictions within an easily digestible story of American music while still maintaining a claim to the downhome authenticity that so much of country music rests upon.

Chapter two deals with concerns about local culture amid the move of the Opry from the Ryman to Opryland. Opry executives and some high-profile performers portrayed the park as a place to escape the city and the "honky-tonk commercialism"—souvenir shops, bars, peep shows—that sprouted up around the Opry's success. But some Nashvillians bemoaned the creation of Opryland. Using testimonies by businessowners to *The Tennessean*, John Hartford's "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore," and the reflections of Opry star Tom T. Hall, I document this coalition's fears which were both economic—a loss of support for small local businesses—and cultural—a less distinctive Nashville. Although they viewed it from different perspectives, both opposing groups saw the suburban surroundings of Opryland as a place that would not support unique, organic development. However, as I show through a study of ancillary businesses around Opryland, locally distinctive cultural institutions—from a honky tonk to a fireworks stand—did emerge and succeed in Opryland's shadow.

The final chapter details the stark change in Opryland's marketing and programming that occurred in the last decade of its existence. Moving further away from the initial vision of Opryland as the "Home of American Music," the company associated itself more and more with not just country music but a more general "country" lifestyle. I situate this appeal within a 1970s and '80s trend of "redneck chic" in which comfortably middle-class white Americans affected working-class identities through fashion, food, and entertainment choices. These changes reveal how Opryland abandoned its superficially diverse initial vision and transitioned to a focus primarily on conservative white Americans. This process also spurred the reemergence of Lower Broadway as an entertainment district, a commercial project which is still going strong in 2020.

In my conclusion, I not only review the major points from throughout the thesis but zoom into the present day when Opryland has been closed for nearly as long as it was open. I do this by combining a reflection on the sources used throughout the essay with some of my personal impressions from living and working in Nashville for three months. I catalog how—despite the Nashville community's initial apprehension—Opryland is now seen nostalgically by many former visitors and employees. Facebook groups like Opryland Memories, home to 6,877 fans of the park, have become digital spaces to celebrate and mourn the loss of the theme park. Though Opryland is gone, its memory still looms over the city. In many ways, I argue, Nashville has become a theme park city where people come to search for many of the same things they sought at Opryland: fun, music, and authenticity.

CHAPTER I
'Real people … real animals … real things': Comfort, Control, Authenticity, and Naturalness in the 1970s

The sweltering June day when the construction of Opryland USA, formally began does not particularly stand out in Bud Wendell's mind. Four years later, in 1974, Wendell would be vice president of WSM and general manager of both the Grand Ole Opry and Opryland, but, despite the fact that he would spend countless hours on that same ground over the next three decades, Opryland's ground breaking is just a blip in his memory. Wendell's recollections are straightforward, plain. "It's really going to happen," he told me when I asked him about what went through his mind that day. "Here it is. We're breaking ground. That's about it."[17] But the scene unfolding that day, June 30, 1970, was a strange one indeed. The wide-open field that would soon become Opryland was mostly empty, save for a gravel parking lot, large tent, makeshift stage, and dozens of buttoned-up Tennessee dignitaries, including Governor Buford Ellington, Nashville Mayor Beverly Briley, and Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff. Soon, the men lost their coats. One of the few people not in professional dress was Bashful Brother Oswald, the Dobro player in Acuff's Smoky Mountain Boys. He wore his signature, downhome outfit—denim overalls and a floppy, yellow hat—and led a team of mules as they ceremonially plowed the land.[18]

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[17] Wendell in discussion with the author.
[18] Alan Nelson, "Opryland USA Groundbreaking 10th Anniversary Video," filmed in 1980 for WSM-TV, Nashville, TN, video, 4:35, reposted to Facebook June 30, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/search/posts/?q=alan%20nelson&epa=SERP_TAB.

The events that took place at Opryland's ground breaking—speeches by elite Nashville businessmen and ceremonial farm work by a caricature of a country bumpkin—symbolized the intention at the heart of Opryland's history. While the park was presented with a folksy nod to life in the rural South and country music's working-class roots, Opryland was ultimately an enterprise led by businessmen and aimed at middle-class audiences in the growing American suburbs. This seeming contradiction appears not just in the ground breaking ceremony but in a variety of archival materials—including press releases, brochures, and advertisements—related to the park's early years in the 1970s. These documents show how Opryland functioned to make country—a diverse, complicated genre—comfortable by building a newly air-conditioned Opry House and manufacturing naturalness in a controlled environment. And, by presenting American history's complexity as easily digestible and harmonious, Opryland became a commercialized and nationalized space divorced from the organic development left behind in downtown Nashville.

As the 1960s rolled into the '70s, the Nashville country music industry that birthed Opryland was at a crossroads of identity over issues of race and politics. Historian Charles Hughes writes that as the industry "asserted country as the voice of traditional southern whiteness, they also promoted it as the forward-thinking soundtrack of the modern South."[19] It's easy to hear this tension in some of the era's popular songs. Tuning into country radio early in the '70s, a listener might hear artists espousing ideas not far off from mainstream center-left politics: Tommy Cash memorializing assassinated Civil Rights icons on "Six White Horses" or Loretta Lynn chronicling her true story of rural,

[19] Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Race and Making Music in the American South* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2015), 4.

southern poverty on "Coal Miner's Daughter." They might hear the artists of the burgeoning Outlaw movement pushing the genre's bounds by loudly incorporating elements of blues, rock, and jazz, or Charley Pride, the crooner from rural Mississippi, carefully navigating the genre as its first Black superstar. However, they very well might hear some of the songs that made many Americans associate country music with white backlash and racism: Guy Drake's "Welfare Cadilac," which mocked imagined government freeloaders, or Merle Haggard's "The Fightin' Side of Me," a rough-and-tumble song aimed at the hippies who "just don't believe in fightin'."[20] Another of Haggard's songs, "Okie from Muskogee," has had its meaning debated for years—whether it celebrated small-town traditionalism or satirized it—but nonetheless it was adopted by many conservatives as an anthem for their politics.[21]

One such fan was President Richard Nixon, who, in March 1970, requested that Johnny Cash perform "Okie from Muskogee" as well as "Welfare Cadilac" at the White House.[22] At the performance in April, Cash declined, claiming he didn't know the songs well and wouldn't be able to prepare his own renditions in time. However, media at the time saw the refusal as a political move and Cash, reflecting later, called the two songs

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[20] Songs in order of reference: Tommy Cash, "Six White Horses," track 1 on *Six White Horses*, Sony Music Entertainment, 1970, Apple Music streaming; Loretta Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter," track 1 on *Coal Miner's Daughter*, MCA Nashville, 1970, Apple Music streaming; "Welfare Cadilac" is harder to track down but a version can be found at MisterSlothfull, "Welfare Cadillac – Guy Drake (1970)," YouTube, posted December 25, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq-hx73or30; Merle Haggard, "The Fightin' Side of Me," track 11 on *The Best of Merle Haggard*, Capitol Records Nashville, 1972, Apple Music Streaming. Information about the Outlaw movement and Charley Pride's career can be found in chapters 9 and 11 of Bill C. Malone and Tracey E. W. Laird, *Country Music USA: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

[21] This debate is chronicled and analyzed in the sixth chapter of Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 180-208.

[22] "Johnny Cash Loath To Sing 'Cadilac' At the White House," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1970, 43, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/31/archives/johnny-cash-loath-to-sing-cadilac-at-the-white-house.html.

"lightning rods for antihippie and antiblack sentiment."[23] Regardless of whether Cash had explicit political motives for declining to perform the songs, this clash between two major figures in American life is emblematic of just how complicated country music's cultural landscape was at the start of the 1970s. It was not, unfortunately for Nixon (the "country music president"), as simple as a unifying force for the "Silent Majority" of white Americans. Until the 1980s and '90s, mainstream country executives, fans, and, most importantly, musicians were still sorting out the genre's politics from their own disparate viewpoints, a process which exposed many conflicts.[24]

Opryland was conceptualized, designed, and promoted in the midst of this conflict and, thus, reflects many of the same issues. In just under two years after construction began, the "rich bottom land" of the Cumberland Valley where those businessmen gathered around Bashful Brother Oswald was transformed into an answer these contradictions.[25] The former field was full of buildings, rides, paths, and parking lots of Opryland, a "110-acre entertainment park composed of five 'towns' which highlight America's bread and butter music—jazz and blues, country, folk, Western and contemporary music."[26]

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[23] Qtd. in Reagan Graney, "An Evening at the White House with Johnny Cash," Boundary Stones: WETA's Local History Blog, posted July 29, 2019, https://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2019/07/29/evening-white-house-johnny-cash#footnote-7.
[24] Chris Willman, "'The Fightin' Side of Me': The Politics of Country Music," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 539-542.
[25] Quoted phrase comes from Nelson, "Opryland USA Groundbreaking."
[26] News release from Opryland USA, "Opryland USA Sets America to Music in a 110-Acre Entertainment Park," 1972, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee. Jack Hurst, "No Animated Gadgetry for Opryland," *The Tennessean*, May 20, 1971, 1-4, Tennessee Electronic Library references another city based on "delta farm music," presumably a reference to the Delta blues. However, I never found any indication that such a part of the park ever came to fruition.

Before exploring the meaning of Opryland, let us take a short tour of the park to better understand the cultural and physical landscape that guests would have encountered while visiting in the early 1970s. To maintain control over the area and ensure the park complex had room to expand, Opryland was placed in a suburban area northeast of the city of Nashville. The park occupied a large tract of mostly undeveloped land but was geographically and culturally situated between two major projects of suburbanization in postwar Nashville. Sitting about 12 miles from the old Ryman Auditorium in downtown Nashville, Opryland was part of the Donelson neighborhood, which grew rapidly from an isolated rural area to a suburban outgrowth of Nashville beginning in the 1940s.[27] Opryland opened during the process of this expansion, so getting to this part of Nashville practically required a car, which could be driven down the Briley Parkway (TN-155)—another feature of Nashville's suburban expansion—after its construction began in 1965.

After exiting the highway and finding a parking spot, visitors would head through the main entrance into Opryland. Although it was artificially constructed, the park appeared as a fairly wooded area, surrounded and dotted by trees.[28] The main entrance filtered into the Opry Plaza, otherwise known as the country music section of the park. Unlike the other "towns," this area of the park was dominated not by a nostalgic townscape but the imposing Opry House, which was completed in 1974, two years after the park's gates opened to visitors. Other attractions here were a "real live radio show"

[27] Nashville, Tennessee, "Volume III: Community Plans," from *NashvilleNext: A General Plan for Nashville & Davidson County*, adopted June 22, 2015, https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/CommPlans2015/next-vol3-DonelsonHermitageOldHickoryUpdated.pdf.

[28] An archival aerial photography by Frank Empson included in "History of Opryland Theme Park," *The Tennessean*, June 20, 2014, https://www.tennessean.com/picture-gallery/money/real-estate/2014/06/20/history-of-opryland-theme-park/11049509/ shows this.

featuring artist interviews and "the Roy Acuff Opry Museum with its extensive collection of antique musical instruments."[29]

Heading south, one would soon enter the "Hill Country" area of the park, which looked like a premodern mountain town and featured a variety of crafters' shops where actors created pottery, carvings, and woven fabrics "the old-fashioned way."[30] The "Hill Country" also featured a restaurant serving "country ham, biscuits, and molasses cake" Folk Music Theatre and, tucked into the trees behind the town, a Log Flume ride.[31] Based on descriptions and pictures, the next section over—the New Orleans cityscape—was the most atmospherically enveloping of all the towns. Rather than a generic representation of a place, the area was designed to be "like a slice out of New Orleans' Bourbon Street."[32] Here, bands would march through the streets and play from the Dixieland Patio, filling the air with the sounds of jazz and meaning that visitors wouldn't have to explicitly seek out shows for a musical experience. The main ride in the New Orleans area was an antique carousel situated on an island in a lake. Other attractions included a magic shop, Artists' Alley, the Seafood Wharf Restaurant, and a coffeeshop.

To get to the "Western" section, guest could ride an antique train on the park's "El Paso Line." Even though the distance was easily traveled by walking, the delaying effect of the process and experience of riding a train would certainly heighten the sense of moving from one place to another. Modeled after the Texas towns of El Paso and San Antonio as they appeared in the 1870s and 1880s, visitors were supposed to get a feel for

[29] News release from Opryland USA.
[30] Newsletter from National Life and Accident Insurance Company, "Our Shield: Special Opryland Issue," 1971 or 1972, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[31] News release from Opryland USA.
[32] Ibid.

the Old West chronicled in film and literature. A poetic description of this sense of time travel in an early promotional material helps explain the atmosphere of this section: "Spanish guitars echo hoofbeats of the old Chisholm Trail … the aroma of tacos fills the air … and sharpshooters test their eye at the Shooting Gallery."[33] After exiting the "Western" town, one would be thrust back into the present-day in the "Music of Today" area, sometimes referred to as "the Mod Section" and always filled with the noise of contemporary pop music.[34] This area was not as thematically organized as the other areas but instead featured a mish-mash of attractions that didn't fit elsewhere, including an ice cream parlor, arcade, a burger joint, the Disc Jockey ride, and a children's petting zoo that contained the "Animal Opry Show" where pigs played pianos and ducks plucked guitars.[35]

The park's design shows that Opryland was intent on giving guests an authentic experience—most often associated with the word "real"—in a controlled, newly constructed environment. When a group of journalists including Jack Hurst of *The Tennessean* were allowed early access to the park under construction in 1971, this sense of realness was the primary focus of Opryland general manager Mike Downs. As he led "about a dozen hardhat-outfitted press visitors across the streams and sewer line ditches" of the in-progress New Orleans and Western towns, Downs waxed poetic about the tourist experience in the modern age. "H. L. Mencken once said you cannot underestimate the taste of men, but that is not true today," Downs said. "Television has

[33] Newsletter from National Life and Accident.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid. My general sense of the geography of Opryland came from combining the resources of the Newsletter from Opryland USA; Newsletter from National Life and Accident; and a scan of the original 1972 map available at "1972 Opryland Map (Mounted Canvas)," OprylandUSA.com, accessed April 12, 2020, http://www.oprylandusa.com/shop/1972-opryland-souvenir-park-map-on-canvas.

given people a hunger to see workmen and artists actually doing the work they do—and see them do it in surroundings that are real and, at the same time, clean and beautiful." Even as he stood in front of a replica of a Texas town circa 1870 being constructed by workers a hundred years later, Downs insisted that, as opposed to some other theme parks across the country, everything at Opryland would be "real." It would consist only of "real people doing real things." In fact, Downs made this pitch about authenticity so effectively that Hurst's front-page article on the tour ended up leading with it, bearing the headline: "No Animated Gadgetry for Opryland."[36]

Ignoring the irony of a man in the country music business quoting a cultural critic who had once called the South a "gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate" totally devoid of meaningful culture, Downs' diagnosis of modern Americans' cravings for authenticity undergirds the central argument for Opryland's existence.[37] And in some ways, he was certainly prescient. Urban planners and scholars have acknowledged the way that theme parks like Opryland function in contemporary society. At Disney World, for instance, much of tourists' time is spent merely wandering the place, "enjoying the precise commodity that people so sorely lack in their suburban hometowns: pleasant, pedestrian-friendly, public space and the sociability it engenders."[38] Social critic James Howard Kunstler has scathingly called Disney World a place where Americans "escape to worship the nation in the abstract, a cartoon capital of a cartoon republic enshrining the falsehoods, half-truths, and delusions that prop up the squishy thing the national character

[36] Hurst, "No Animated Gadgetry," 1-4.
[37] Quote is from H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 159.
[38] Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 63.

has become."[39] These same Americans, who traveled newly built interstate highways to arrive at Opryland, would have witnessed the "Blanding of America" out their car windows at gas stations, rest areas, and travel plazas.[40] Disneyland, Disney World, and Opryland were all designed to be and operated as escapes from the reality of an everyday life characterized by uniformity, isolation, and long drives. Historian Eric Avila has historicized this line of reasoning and taken it a step further to argue that Disneyland "provided a spatial articulation of a new suburban ethos that millions of Americans adopted." As much as it was an escape, Disneyland also mimicked suburbia with its "proximity to freeways, its highly disciplined ordering of space, its validation of patriarchy and the nuclear family, and its thematic emphasis on racial distinctions."[41] Opryland's design certainly promoted a similar vision in its whitewashed cityscapes, extreme maintenance procedures, and cloyingly nostalgic presentation of American history.

The park's connection with Disneyland and Disney World—which opened in 1955 and 1961 respectively and, along with Six Flags Over Texas, became models for many modern theme parks—is more than just a similarity in appearances. In statements about Opryland, executives consciously pointed to Disneyland as a model for the planned theme park. An article published in *The Tennessean* includes a quote stating that Opryland would be "a vast complex, including … an amusement park 'with a Disneyland

[39] James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 217.
[40] William Kaszynski, *The American Highway: The History and Culture of Roads in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000), 192.
[41] Eric Avila, "Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Film Noir, Disneyland, and the Cold War (Sub)Urban Imaginary," *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 1 (November 2004): 10.

atmosphere.'"[42] Reflecting on the Opryland planning process, Wendell expressed a similar sentiment, saying that "In the early development of all theme parks, there was a certain amount of looking to Disney as to how they had set the pattern—the feel, the flavor, that sort of thing. We looked at them and tried to find keys to their success, perhaps, that would transfer over." Part of this work included making sure that Opryland was a "tourist destination"—a contained, immersive experience—rather than just one of many attractions in a large city.[43] Economic Research Associates, a Los Angeles consulting group which had helped plan Disneyland, worked with WSM and National Life and Accident in the early stages of planning their new park.[44] Then, when WSM chose an architectural firm to design Opryland, they certainly took the Disney model into mind. They settled on Randall Duell and Associates, a firm also based out of Los Angeles, known primarily for their work on theme parks, and led by a man with a Disneyesque penchant for childhood nostalgia and fantasy.[45]

A transplanted Southern Californian, Duell's background—schooled in architecture but supplemented with decades in Hollywood—affected his designs. After studying architecture at the University of Southern California, Duell left the industry during the Depression and began designing sets for Hollywood films. He rose to prominence in the coming decades as a set designer for MGM, earning Academy Awards nods for multiple films. His most recognizable movie industry work, though, was 1952's

[42] Bill Preston, Jr., "WSM Plans 'Opryland' Recordings," *The Tennessean*, December 22, 1968, 1-8-A, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[43]Lindsay Chappell, "An Interview with E.W. (Bud) Wendell," *Nashville Business Advantage*, January 1985.
[44] Preston, "WSM Plans 'Opryland' Recordings."
[45] Fact sheet from Opryland USA, "Fact Sheet: Opryland USA, the Home of American Music," May 1, 1972, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.

"Singin' in the Rain," which he collaborated on with Cedric Gibbons. In the late '50s, Duell returned to construction, aiding in the design of two theme parks in the Northeast: Boston's Pleasure Island and New York City's Freedomland. Duell completed his first solo park in 1961 with Six Flags Over Texas, which, like Opryland, included six park areas based on periods of Texas's "colorful history."[46] Duell's architectural vision was central to the first iteration of Opryland. He was willing to engage his imagination, creating theme parks for children rather than their parents. Before heading to the drawing board, Duell would spend hours reading children's books to get inspiration. "If we can find things the kids are interested in and put it in three dimensions, we've accomplished something," he once told the *Los Angeles Times*.[47] Duell's time around elaborate Hollywood sets also influenced the artistic vision he brought to theme parks which took semi-historical spaces to their wondrous and exciting outer bounds.

However, contrary to Duell's fantastical tendencies, the Opryland that emerged was firmly rooted in the "real"—authenticity as seen through upper- and middle-class eyes. At its inception, Opryland positioned itself not only as a pleasant, unique place to walk around with a family but as a place centered around a diverse, exceptionally American, and "strikingly" real set of experiences.[48] Opryland, the company argued, was the diversity of the U.S. condensed into a single park. On one plot of land nestled between the newly constructed Briley Parkway and the Cumberland River, a family could

[46] Burt A. Folkart, "Randall Duell: Designed Magic Mountain, Other Parks," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-12-03-mn-1696-story.html; "About Six Flags Over Texas," Six Flags Over Texas, accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.sixflags.com/overtexas/news-room/about.
[47] Folkart, "Randall Duell."
[48] Newsletter from National Life and Accident.

take in the whole American experience. They could do in a single day what might otherwise take much more driving, money, and backseat sibling scuffles.

Opryland's early promotional materials relied heavily on this pitch to potential visitors. A news release from 1972 is the most obvious example of this campaign. Echoing Downs' comments to *The Tennessean*, the release's authors repeatedly use the word "real" to refer to the sense of authenticity they hoped Opryland would project. "The total entertainment at Opryland is real people and real animals doing real things," it reads. "There is no animated hoopla to take away from the Americana flavor of the park." The description of the park towns that followed sounded much the same. Visitors could "see real craftsmen" and experience "the realness of jazz and blues."[49] A fact sheet from the same year doubled down on these claims: "There is NO animation. Instead, the total flavor is one of reality from live buffalo roaming the range to honest to goodness American antiques used throughout the scores of buildings."[50] A 1974 advertisement bearing the tagline "The beautiful Tennessee woods are alive with music and fun" provides a visual representation of this same claim. It featured a jam-packed scene of vaguely American things stacked on top of one another. A man in a boater hat blows a trumpet while an American Indian chief stares off into the distance, a mountain lion stalks some unseen prey, and an old-fashioned train rushes out of the woods, blowing steam high into the trees.[51] This document reiterates just how much of the American

[49] News release from Opryland USA.
[50] Fact sheet from Opryland USA.
[51] Advertisement for Opryland USA, "The beautiful Tennessee woods are alive with music and fun," 1974, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.

experience can supposedly be experienced within the park's boundaries while making those experiences seem magical and real at the same time.

These marketing claims, however, created a dissonance with how the park was managed and created. The park's purported authenticity relied on intense, careful management that was the opposite of natural and reflected the American suburban ethic. In the postwar suburbs, racial and economic exclusivity dovetailed with the desire for property ownership and the sense of control and power that came with such a status.[52] Opryland was treated much the same way in its early stages. Explaining to journalists why Opryland would not use leased contractors, general manager Downs said that "it is difficult for Opryland to control the performance and appearance of people operating concessions under a lease." This ethic pervaded even the most minute aspects of the park experience. For Downs, it was paramount for the park to fine-tune something as small as a hamburger: "We're going to do our best to see that the hamburger—or anything else—you get at Opryland is the best you ever had."[53] In a 1985 interview, Wendell put the story of Opryland's genesis in decidedly suburban language. "We felt that the Opry as an institution couldn't continue to survive in that sort of environment," he said. "That's when we decided we needed a parcel of land somewhere so we could build a new home for the Opry in a controlled environment."[54] Much like the earlier quotes from Opry executives that Hill cites in *Country Comes to Town*, Wendell reiterates the story of fleeing a decaying downtown. But this telling of the story brings a new element:

[52] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 6-11.
[53] Hurst, "No Animated Gadgetry."
[54] Chappell, "An Interview."

Opryland is the suburban parcel of land where the Opry built "a new home" and which the company could exert total control over its appearance and operations.

Another crucial way that Opryland's contradictory authenticity arguments manifested themselves were in the park's physical environment. As journalist Alan Nelson put it, National Life and Accident "bought an adjoining pasture over here and planted a unique crop. They planted $29 million. Their product, their crop: an entertainment complex called Opryland USA"[55] For this to happen, the land along the Cumberland had to be transformed by humans and then reimagined and marketed as "the natural surroundings of 369 acres of Tennessee woods and hills." This façade of naturalness was outlined in the 1972 press release: "Ravines and pastures have been turned into habitat areas where visitors can safely walk among buffalo, elk, deer, cougars, bears and timber wolves in their natural habitats."[56] To create these so-called "natural habitats," an already natural space had to be changed to create this area of the park that would house dangerous, wild animals while human visitors' sense of safety was maintained. This is effectively the opposite of naturalness. A 1971 article explains that some 4,000 trees had to be transplanted within the Opryland property to create the "natural" environment of the new park. John Kretchmer, Opryland's public relations director, claimed that the operation was "one of the nation's biggest tree moving jobs in one location." Images of trucks and bulldozers carrying fully grown trees provide proof of how intensive this project was.[57] While this process preserved the existing, "real" landscape more than clearcutting and paving the entire property, it still underscores the

[55] Nelson, "Opryland USA Groundbreaking."
[56] News release from Opryland USA.
[57] "Tote That Tree," *The Tennessean,* August 8, 1971, magazine insert, Tennessee Electronic Library.

high degree of control that undergirded the Opryland vision. A complex web of human actions—including the destruction of truly natural spaces—paradoxically made the claim that Opryland was "alive with naturalness" possible.

One other crucial part of Opryland's early authenticity arguments that bears mentioning and investigating was its claim of being "The Home of American Music" and a place where people could "step into the heart and soul of American music."[58] Though the reason Opryland opened and got its name was rooted in Nashville's country music ties, the original park presented a seemingly diverse take on American music. The park was designed to create a sense of American omnipresence—a feeling that all pieces of American cultural history deemed worthy of inclusion fit neatly together—but was still based around the strict genre divisions grafted onto twentieth-century American music. The way Opryland divided its towns, such as the lumping together of "jazz and blues," often fell along a musical "color line" created in the first half of the 1900s.[59] Thus, while Opryland did not create these genre lines, their portrayal of them within the park reified their social meaning for park visitors.

Although likely unintentional, it is not hard to imagine that two generations of children from Nashville and across the eastern U.S. learned many of their ideas about American music from Opryland. Two of the most pervasive lessons those young visitors may have taken away dealt with the country's most racialized genres: jazz, blues, and Appalachian folk music. The "jazz and blues" section's combining of musical styles associated with Black musicians shows an adherence to older essentialist ideas about

[58] News release from Opryland USA.
[59] Ibid.; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Creating Folk and Pop Music in the Jim Crow South* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2010), 2.

Black artists.[60] In creating the "jazz and blues" section despite Black musicians' significant contributions to both country, folk, and 1970s pop music, Opryland pigeonholed these artists into a limited, racialized category while still benefiting from showcasing a so-called diverse story of American music. The "folk" or "hill country" town, on the other hand, trafficked in ideas about white racial purity. This park section illustrated the common yet incorrect myth that "hillbilly" music's roots were in an isolated, culturally backward, and almost magical Appalachian region that preserved older, European cultural traditions.[61] "For a hundred years and more," summarizes Bill C. Malone, "Americans have exhibited a romantic fascination with a body of music that seems to evoke a cluster of values and a way of life that stand in stark relief to the dominant culture of our urban-industrial nation."[62] But, in fact, these ideas about Appalachian culture act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, isolating Appalachian people and music necessarily in the past. At Opryland, the "Hill Country" presented a vision of an Appalachian town without "any modern electric machines to handle the work in those days" with actors "dressed in their authentic costumes of the day."[63] Like the linking of "jazz and blues," this historicized presentation of Appalachia solidified these older, romantic ideas about American music for a new generation of mostly white, post-Civil Rights Era kids.

As a point of comparison, the emerging Austin, Texas, country music scene promoted similar themes as Opryland but staked its claims to authenticity and diversity

[60] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 225.
[61] Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2014), 4.
[62] Bill C. Malone, *Sing Me Back Home: Southern Roots and Country Music* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2017), 239.
[63] Newsletter from National Life and Accident.

on its local history of organic musical exchange. This cultural landscape, which Travis Stemiling explores in *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene*, sprang up in direct opposition to the country experiments going on in Nashville throughout the 1960s and '70s. Rather than being driven by American mass culture, Austin presented itself as "a musically eclectic city that rejected the perceived homogenous musical offerings of Nashville, New York, and Los Angeles in favor of musical practices that were shaped by local histories."[64] The particular history of KOKE-FM, a progressive country radio station, speaks to this view of Nashville. Progressive country radio "challenged the dominance of mainstream country and Nashville's increasing hegemony," represented most concretely in the increasingly powerful Country Music Association, "by creating a broadcast format that reflected local, not national tastes and musical practices." The great fear was that Texas culture, to quote one Austin D.J., would be "overwhelmed by TV and magazines and blandness from popular culture."[65]

In many ways, this D.J.'s concern perfectly describes one interpretation of what happened to Nashville in the early 1970s: a dirty auditorium with a unique history was replaced by a bland park that could very well have been called Anywhere, USA. Thought up by elite Nashvillians, designed by Californians, and populated with attractions that have no historical connection to Nashville, Opryland throughout the 1970s and '80s exemplified a nationalized vision of a park where all of the U.S. could be experienced in one place. As this chapter has shown, the executives who engineered Opryland and

[64] Travis Stemiling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2011), 12.
[65] Stemiling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks*, 25.

championed moving the *Grand Ole Opry* out there were intent—in stark contrast to Austin's scene—on controlling the atmosphere of Nashville venues in an effort to create a place simultaneously authentic and organic, all-encompassing and comfortable. The next chapter will both build on and complicate this idea that Nashville was devoid of local culture and, implicitly, overtaken by bland popular culture.

CHAPTER II
"Honky-tonk commercialism": Local Culture Beyond Opryland's Gates

On July 1, 1981, a father named Duke Marsh took his two teenagers, Marianne and Oliver, on a road trip. The Marshes, who lived near the Indiana-Kentucky border, had a "long, hot drive to Nashville" ahead of them. They stocked a Styrofoam cooler with ice at a food mart near their home and wore the shortest of shorts. Cruising at 65 miles per hour down I-65, they passed by exits for Bardstown and Bowling Green, stopped for lunch at a Wendy's, and eventually saw the large sign for "The Great State of Tennessee." They weren't far from their destination: Opryland USA, the tourist complex built a decade before in the Nashville suburbs.[66]

Unlike many family trips which exist only in memories, the Marshes' trip was recorded on a Super 8 video camera. Duke's nine-minute long video provides a visual tour of the theme park and intimate access to what a family trip might be like. It includes footage from shows at the park and Duke's detailed voiceover narration. They rode all manner of rides from water rides like Flume Zoom and Grizzy River Rampage to the Wabash Cannonball rollercoaster and the antique car ride Tin Lizzie. They attended at least two shows, both of which were rock 'n' roll performances in the Do Wah Diddy City section. They saw Jean Shepard perform in the Grand Ole Opry House completed in 1974. One of Opryland's primary arguments in the 1970s – that tourists would never

[66] Duke Marsh, "Opryland Trip 1981," YouTube, posted May 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2kn5zhZAiQ.

have to leave the Opryland complex – was mostly right. The Marshes basically stayed within the general vicinity of Opryland, leaving only once to visit the Cumberland Museum (now the Adventure Science Center) for a laser show. But this film serves as a counternarrative to Opryland's own promotional materials and gives a glimpse into what a typical family's experience at the park might be like. While Duke and his two children obviously enjoy themselves – shown in Marianne's and Oliver's continual smiles throughout the film – their experience seemed to focus on different things than what the park advertised to potential visitors.[67] The press releases, brochures, and advertisements which formed the primary source material for chapter one emphasize how the park, through its actors, shows, animals, and landscape, presented the "authenticity and uniqueness of America."[68] For the Marshes, though, the rides seemed to be the most important part of the trip. The shows and surroundings merely filled the space as they walked from ride to ride.

Also unlike the park's own materials, the "Opryland Trip 1981" video documents a family's whole trip – from filling that cooler with ice at home to eating a "Big Boy Breakfast" (which Duke pronounces in a comically deep voice) at Shoney's. When the Marshes arrive in Nashville they check into their lodgings near the park. Rather than stay at one of the official Opryland hotels, Duke opted for the Fiddler's Motel. Although we don't see their room on screen, Duke describes their room sarcastically calling it "one of the fancier" ones consisting of "two pairs of bunk beds complete with semi-matresses and

[67] Marsh, "Opryland Trip."
[68] News release from Opryland USA.

no ladders." After their visit to Opryland, Duke pays the hotel bill and they have their breakfast at Shoney's. Then they are back on the road again.[69]

Before crossing the state line, the Marshes pulled off of I-65 to "buy some legal fireworks in Tennessee to bring back and illegally shoot off in Indiana." These fireworks were heavily advertised on this stretch of road, where two large fireworks stands with oddly derivative names competed for customers. On one side, adorned with a bright yellow, blue, and red sign, was Loco Joe's Fireworks, on the other, marked by the same colors plus a cartoonish weeping clown's face, the Sad Sam Fireworks Outlet. Sad Sam's was where the Marshes decided to get their fireworks. It was also a visual testament to the far reach of Opryland. Beneath the main sign at Sad Sam's was a list of other things sold there: cold beer, picnic supplies, country hams, and Opryland souvenirs.[70] Sad Sam's, which still exists today (albeit with an updated building and lit-up crying clown), was located in Cross Plains, a town about thirty miles north of Opryland.[71] This fireworks store's attempt to capitalize on Opryland's popularity by selling souvenirs suggests that Opryland stretched out well beyond the 110 acres of the park grounds.

Places like Sad Sam's, however, were far from what Opryland executives hoped their park would be associated with a decade after its opening. Early in the planning process, the chairman of WSM's and National Life and Accident's board G. Daniel Brooks laid out a different vision: "It is our plan to create a park of great beauty … We expect to give it the strictest maintenance, and the surrounding land will enable us to keep

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[69] Marsh, "Opryland Trip."
[70] Ibid.
[71] A more recent photo of Sad Sam's can be found at Ronny Salerno, "When I Die: Bury Me Behind Sad Sam's Fireworks Outlet and Market," Queen City Discovery, last updated July 11, 2018, http://queencitydiscovery.blogspot.com/2018/07/when-i-die-bury-me-behind-sad-sams.html.

out the garish, honky-tonk commercialism that has sprung up around some of the other amusement areas around the nation."[72] The word "honky-tonk" calls to mind both rough, rural beer joints and an unmistakably working-class style of country music that historian Peter La Chapelle calls "a raw, unruly poor-white subgenre that possibly stemmed from black origins."[73] This critique of "honky-tonk commercialism" is undoubtedly an expression of the immediate concern among Nashville elites that hosting the Grand Ole Opry in the Ryman Auditorium near the downtown "slums" would endanger visitors and portray the country industry's home city in a bad light. Brooks' fear that these establishments would spring "up around" Opryland echoes Roy Acuff's reasoning for why the Opry needed to move in the first place. "So many of the undesirable types of establishments got up around us down there," Acuff said.[74]

But Brooks' point that these kinds of businesses and places have "sprung up around some of the other amusement areas" evokes a much larger rift between popular and local culture that occurred in and around Nashville in the 1970s and '80s. As WSM left behind the Ryman for the updated facilities they were constructing at Opryland, they also left behind several businesses that developed organically from the popularity of the Opry at the Ryman. These businesses, surely considered "honky-tonk commercialism" by Opry executives, helped influence the distinctive character of the Lower Broad neighborhood for better or worse.[75] This chapter will explore a narrative of loss and decline that emerged to describe the Opry's exit from downtown, but also explain how a

[72] "Opryland, USA To Offer Facilities 'Like No Other'" *The Tennessean*, 4, Oct. 14, 1969, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[73] Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 151.
[74] Qtd. in Hill, *Country Comes to Town*, 83.
[75] Much more information about the controversy and many quotes from Opry decisionmakers can be found in chapter 4 of Hill, *Country Comes to Town*.

new set of ancillary businesses that popped up around Opryland gave the area surrounding the park its own distinctive, local character. Building from chapter one, I seek to demonstrate how Opryland—a placeless place, associated with American popular culture at the expense of local connections—was transformed into an accepted feature of the Nashville cultural landscape.

Even before the park opened to the public, the small businesses that thrived on the steady stream of tourists that the Opry brought to downtown Nashville each week were concerned about how Opryland might damage their livelihood. An article published in *The Tennessean* on August 2, 1971, titled "Economic Scars Loom Downtown When Opry Relocates" pointed out these worries and gave several business owners the opportunity to speak about their fears. The businesses hardest hit by the Opry relocation were those "dependent almost entirely on weekend trade brought by the Opry," such as souvenir shops that sold tchotchkes—ranging from spoons embossed with Opry-related slogans to Rebel flag and "Keep on Truckin'" license plates to faux antique lanterns—to tourists passing through Nashville.[76] Alford Stagg, owner of a souvenir shop, did not mince his words as he described the sad reality that, after the Opry moved, his business would be "dead as a doornail." While Stagg was not certain what he would do with his business, another souvenir shop owner, James Scott, felt close to certain that he would have to shutter his doors. One of Lower Broad's most famous and popular businesses, the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, was even sounding alarms.[77] Started by its namesake country

[76] Quote from Mike Korpan, "Economic Scars Loom Downtown When Opry Relocatees," *The Tennessean*, August 2, 1971, 1, Tennessee Electronic Library. Pictures and descriptions of the souvenirs can be found at Natilee Duning, "Gimcracks, Gew-Gaws and the Opry," *The Tennessean*, November 18, 1973, magazine insert, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[77] Korpan, "Economic Scars Loom."

star in 1947 as an early attempt to capitalize on the Opry's success and promote Tubb's music, the record store was considering relocating their business to stay afloat. The store's manager, Sue Kline, told *The Tennessean*: "I don't think we could survive if we stayed here."[78] The storeowners' fears highlight a negative aspect of the Opry's move, but they also reveal just how precarious of a situation these businesses were in before National Life and Accident announced their decision. Any change to the Opry would have impacted the stores. Besides worries about his bottom line, the co-owner of Crazy Horse Gifts felt that the Opry—Nashville's primary connection to country history—would lose its distinctiveness and magic. It would become just another tourist attraction worth visiting once. "The whole mood will change. …," he said. "The comfort of the new auditorium will destroy that feeling. Attendance probably won't go down after the move, but people will come only once, as I see it—not every year like a lot of 'em do now."[79]

In addition to shops hawking trinkets to tourists, a variety of bars and lounges on Broadway catered to the pre- and post-Opry crowd. The most well-known and influential of these bars was Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, "a meeting spot for country music entertainers and tourists … and a stop for country music stars in the city" ever since it was purchased by Jeff and Hattie Louise "Tootsie" Bess in 1960.[80] The scholar Jeremy Hill describes Tootsie's, which had a physical connection to the Ryman via a back alleyway, as part of the "ritualized space of an Opry visit."[81] This was primarily because

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[78] Ibid.; Nathan Ledford, "Ernest Tubb Record Shop," *Bygone Nashville*, last updated April 6, 2020, https://bygone-nashville.mtsu.edu/items/show/32.; The complete relocation did not happen, although the business did eventually open a location near Opryland along with locations in Pigeon Forge, Fort Worth, and Branson. Ironically considering the concerns in 1971, the location at Opryland closed in 2016 because of declining sales and traffic.
[79] Duning, "Gimcracks."
[80] Korpan, "Economic Scars Loom"; Daniel Cooper, "Tootsie's Orchid Lounge," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 516.
[81] Hill, *Country Comes to Town*, 78.

it was the rare space that facilitated creative exchange between musicians—Willie Nelson, for example, pitched his hit "Hello Walls" to Faron Young there—and gave tourists a chance to interact with otherwise high-profile artists. Tootsie herself was known, on one hand, for her generosity toward struggling songwriters and, on the other, her willingness to be "tough on troublemakers," whom she would threaten with a hat pin. She and her husband were transplants from Hohenwald, a town southwest of Nashville, and Tootsie's personality became one of the most distinctive aspects of the bar.[82] When interviewed in 1971, Tootsie seemed unmoved about the Opry's move. She claimed tourists would keep coming and, since she had "dozens of country music stars' autographs on the wall," she couldn't actually move out of her current building.[83] But, in the aftermath of the move and shortly before her death in 1978, Tootsie expressed a sense of betrayal: "They ran off and left me, I didn't go off and leave them."[84] Even this longtime Nashville institution soaked in country music history was damaged by the decision of the much larger corporations that facilitated the creation of Opryland.

Other businesses not as tied to the Opry tourism expected to suffer purely because of the loss of foot traffic in that area of town. Lower Broadway already had a reputation as a dangerous, seedy area, which kept many Nashvillians from other neighborhoods from choosing to shop there. With Lower Broad's main attraction gone, out-of-town tourists would not have much reason to visit the street either. Some of these secondary businesses included liquor stores, pawn shops, and restaurants. Like the other business owners, these proprietors argued that this loss was more than just economic. Don Brooks,

[82] Cooper, "Tootsie's Orchid Lounge," 516.
[83] Korpan, "Economic Scars Loom."
[84] Qtd. in Cooper, "Tootsie's Orchid Lounge," 516.

owner of the Broadway Barn, apparently spoke with tourists who told him that without the "old, beat-up building [the Ryman] … the Opry wouldn't be the Opry," suggesting to some fans the space was as or more important as the performers on stage. This anecdote, told early on in the process of relocating the Opry, demonstrates how Nashville was coming to terms with the loss of one of its major cultural features in the early 1970s. And, coupled with other residents' stories of loss, highlights a pattern of collective mourning that carried on until the Ryman was revitalized and Opryland accepted.

One of the restaurants that expected to be hurt by the Opry move was Linebaugh's, a 24/7 diner situated across from the Ryman and next door to the Merchant's Hotel. The owner, George Linebaugh, spoke for himself, stating that, even though he didn't expect Linebaugh's to close completely, he was prepared to lose 30-35% of his business and close during the nighttime.[85] Linebaugh's would eventually close, but not before the singer-songwriter John Hartford had something to say. The eclectic musician best known for writing Glen Campbell's "Gentle on My Mind" wrote and recorded the song "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore" soon after. The song, released in 1972, is a prime example of the narrative of decline emerging in the wake of the Opry's exit from downtown. It also offers a counternarrative to the boosterism of National Life and Accident and WSM executives and Opry stars who championed the move. Hartford's lyrics reference Linebaugh's, Ernest Tubb's Record Shop, and the Merchant's Hotel by name, helping to illustrate for listeners the variety of locally unique places that operated near the Opry. In contrast, the lyrics never explicitly name Opryland,

[85] Korpan, "Economic Scars Loom."

instead referring to it simply as "the park."[86] By refusing to name this corporate endeavor, Hartford aligns himself with these local businesses that represent organic growth driven by everyday Nashvillians' ingenuity rather than a multimillion dollar complex approved by consultants and public relations teams.

In one sense, Hartford seems concerned with chronicling a story for the annals of country music history: how the Opry would lose its magic and authenticity when it left the Ryman. The over six-minute song opens by adopting the voice of a disappointed tourist asking "Where can you go to see the country music stars? / That's what we come to Nashville for." While there is a sense of entitlement and aloofness in a tourist asking to be just pointed in the direction of the country stars, the fact that there were actually places to not only see the stars but interact with them the relative closeness of the country music community. As outlined before, Tootsie's was one such meeting place. Linebaugh's, where, as the song goes on to say, one might see "the country music stars / sittin', drinkin' coffee 'til four," was another.[87] But such places didn't exist at Opryland when performances moved there in 1974. The relative intimacy of the Ryman Auditorium—which was jam-packed with fans and performers alike on Opry nights—and the "ritualized space" surrounding it only heightened this sense of closeness which was absent from the large, modernized Opry House.[88] So, on one level, the loss of community which the song laments is a loss taking place within the broader country music family of fans and artists.

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[86] John Hartford, "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore," track 2 on *Morning Bugle*, Warner Records, Inc., 1972, Apple Music streaming.
[87] Hartford, "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore."
[88] Hill, *Country Comes to Town*, 78.

However, when put in conversation with the quotes from businessowners, "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore" is more than just a poetic nostalgia or sentimentalism for the Grand Ole Opry of bygone days. The song gives voice to the fears of small businesses and sets those concerns to music. Because of both the particular situation of Nashville and the general trend of suburbanization, there is an implicit concern in the song about a loss of community and togetherness. Even though "everyone's gone to the park," that location is barely talked about—all listeners would know is that it's "somewhere in the suburbs," has rides, and "shuts up at bedtime." And, while everybody is supposedly out at Opryland, downtown Nashville is empty of tourists and locals alike. All three of the businesses mentioned by name are obviously hurt by the move. There's no one eating at Linebaugh's, the lights aren't on at Ernest Tubb's Record Shop, and "the drunks are gone from the Merchant's Hotel." The speaker doesn't say anything more about these drunks that hung around Merchant's, but certainly they haven't gone with the tourists to the park. In Hartford's imagined post-Opry downtown, even these drunks, who might be homeless with literally with no place else to go and certainly haven't gone with the tourists to the park, have little reason to be on Lower Broad. Since "Shoney's closed at nine o'clock," there aren't even places to go at night.[89] This is a glimpse into a Lower Broadway that has been abandoned by the Opry, National Life and Accident, and WSM for the economic prospects of Opryland and, because of this abandonment, been left behind by the local people and travelers that powered the district's local economy.

[89] Hartford, "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore."

Much like Hartford, Tom T. Hall, a Grand Ole Opry member best known for his engaging country music storytelling, was an outspoken critic of the Opry leaving the Ryman. He eventually grew so disillusioned with the show's management and new location that he left the cast. His arguments against the move primarily relied on the supposed inauthenticity of the new park and the fear that a Nashville institution would lose some of its exceptional quality by becoming part of a place designed as a tourist attraction. Hall outlined his anti-Opryland case and expressed his feelings about the two venues in an interview just months after the move:

> As soon as we moved to the new place, I immediately and instinctively did not like it. The Ryman was different. It was almost an ego trip, really, standing on the same stage where Hank Williams once performed and knowing there were people out there who appreciated what you were doing, who had driven in some cases a couple hundred miles to see it. But the audiences now don't know what they're looking at. The old-time acts are being put down and dismissed. They're playing to people who don't know what they are seeing, who stop in at Opryland on their way to Florida and take in a performance of the *Opry* and think, "What the hell is this guy doing?"[90]

Admitting that it's tied to his own "ego," Hall explains the magical, mysterious allure of the Ryman. Over decades, among country music artists and fans, the Ryman was collectively assigned historical and artistic significance. Stars like Hank Williams had traveled the country, playing to eager audiences in countless gymnasiums, nightspots, and

[90] Qtd. in Frye Gaillard, *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country* Music (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2004), 32-33, Google Books.

city parks, but, at the Ryman, those disparate fans purposefully came together to be reunited with their favorite performers. Yes, the Nashville community might suffer, but, Hall suggests, so might the country music community built on individual, mutual fan-artist relationships. Thought of in this way, the Ryman truly was the "Mother Church of Country Music," the cathedral of a widespread civic religion.

Hall gave more of his thoughts about Opryland in his memoir *The Storyteller's Nashville: A Gritty and Glorious Life in Country Music,* first published in 1979 then updated in 2016. In the book, he describes how he saw the Ryman as a place that naturally came together: "The architecture was accidental. Things seemed to have fallen into place by some sort of evolutionary process."[91] Beyond the sense of tradition that Hall detailed in his comments to the journalist, the Ryman itself—as a building, independent of its history—was emblematic of an older, downhome attitude for Hall. The Opry's new home was, in Hall's words, "a big, cozy, air-conditioned building" where performers were "hobnobbing with the likes of President Nixon" when he appeared at the Opry House's grand opening. And, while Hall admits later in his memoir that Opryland is "a very beautiful park" where the "Opry thrives," this new place just didn't have the same "mystery and feel … that would be hard to put into print" as the Ryman. Like Hartford, he also mourned the fact that businessowners such as Tootsie Bess were left behind. "Tootsie was left stranded there on Lower Broadway and Fifth Street without benefit of her beloved pickers. The porno shops and honky-tops were growing around her daily," he writes, painting a picture of a community-oriented bar being overtaken by places solely existing for quick pleasure. This dissatisfaction, coupled with frustration from the chaos

[91] Tom T. Hall, *The Storyteller's Nashville: A Gritty and Glorious Life in Country Music* (Nashville: Spring House Press, 2016), 126-127.

of life as an Opry member, led him to quit the Opry soon after the Opry House opened.[92] The haphazard construction and unpredictability of the Ryman was somehow more manageable for Hall than the intense control and comfort of the new Opry. To him, the Opry "had become very modern in appearance" but "seemed stuck in another era."[93] Hall's description of what the move represented—a shift from disorder to order, authenticity to inauthenticity—relates to Opryland's fear of "honky-tonk" businesses with a make-do attitude. These two opposing ways of viewing the same issue help to explain why National Life and Accident and WSM would want to escape a place which appeared haphazard and disorganized to one of its staunchest defenders.

Yet, despite its operators' qualms, Opryland would soon be surrounded by the "garish, honky-tonk commercialism" it was so intent on leaving behind downtown and keeping out in the suburbs. Counter to both Hartford and Hall's concern-trolling and Opryland's anti-local stance, unique yet brazenly commercial businesses began to pop up in the shadow of Opryland and its new Opry House. Much of this development happened right off the McGavock Pike, a road which passes over the Briley Parkway. This new suburban entertainment district soon came to be called Music Valley. Some of the development's businesses, like the Fiddler's Motel, souvenir shops, and a Cracker Barrel, worked symbiotically with the park to serve visitors. When the park was closed or guests were on their way out of town, they could still eat, shop, and sleep. However, other enterprises seemed to compete for the park's same guests. There were, for example, a

[92] Hall, *The Storyteller's Nashville*, 183-187.
[93] Ibid., 186.

miniature golf course and a "Water Boggan" ride consisting of a $600,000 manmade hill that guests could pay $2.00 to slide down a water flume on Styrofoam pads.[94]

One of the first businesses to arrive in this area just across the street from Opryland was the Nashville Palace, a honky-tonk-style venue aimed primarily at catching Opry tourist business. The Nashville Palace, which still operates today—outlasting Opryland by decades—provides a compelling Opryland-adjacent business to examine. It was opened in 1977 and originally called Jerry Reed's Nashville Palace because it began as a collaborative venture between the *Smokey and the Bandit* star and businessman John Hobbs.[95] The venue quickly outgrew its role as an accessory to the Opry and became known as a place to see established and rising country stars alike. "It was one of the first places artists would play and you'd see them somewhere besides the Grand Ole Opry," said Barrett Hobbs, the Palace's current owner and John Hobbs' grandson.[96] For some artists, such as Johnny Cash and George Jones, the Nashville Palace was likely a way to feel connected to fans after crowded concerts and Opry performances. For others like Lorrie Morgan and Ricky Van Shelton, it was a welcoming launching point for successful careers. Randy Travis in particular credits the Nashville Palace and John Hobbs with helping to establish him as the acclaimed musician he eventually became. Besides performing, Travis cleaned, cooked, and performed handyman tasks. After cleaning an exhaust vent one day, John Hobbs gave Travis "a raise and has treated me like family

[94] "Opryland Area Road Growth Cited," *The Tennessean*, March 25, 1977, 22, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[95] Laura Eipper, "Jerry Reed Opening Night Club-Restaurant," *The Tennesean*, April 26, 1977, 13, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[96] Nate Rau, "Nearing 40, Nashville Palace honky tonk starts to regain its luster," *The Tennessean*, July 2, 2017, https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/2017/07/03/nearing-40-nashville-palace-honky-tonk-starts-regain-its-luster/411810001/.

ever since. I love the man."[97] This sort of close relationship between a businessowner and young performer is strikingly similar to Tootsie's motherly role in the lives of young songwriters described earlier in this chapter. Ever since it was established as the capital of the American country music scene, Nashville has attracted aspiring performers and wandering songwriters, many of whom have been welcomed into the city's music community. Although the Opry's move and Opryland's creation took those interactions out into the suburbs, neither event made them disappear completely. A crucial part of Nashville's distinctive culture continued in the new space of Music Valley.

The Nashville Palace might be Music Valley's most famous attraction, but perhaps the most peculiar was Tim Tichenor's Land of Make Believe, a collection of fantastical dioramas built by the project's namesake puppeteer and scattered around a log house. Tichenor was a proud member of the Nashville community, gaining recognition for his puppet shows at the city's libraries and radio and T.V. productions for WSM. In 1977, he teamed up with Jim Stein and John Noel III to create the Land of Make Believe. The log cabin served as a more permanent home for Tichenor's "creations and collections." These included his own characters like Felicia Fieldmouse and Blossom Possum, an elaborate Enchanted Palace, and set pieces based on fairy tales like Beauty and the Beast. Clara Hieronymous, the author of an article published in advance of the attraction's opening, wrote lush descriptions of the space as if it were another world. At the Enchanted Palace, she mused, "it only rains on the flowers, and towers and pavilions are gilded and jeweled and glass swans, peacocks, cats and ducks roam gardens lush with

[97] Information about the artists who performed at the Nashville Palace plus a captioned photograph detailing Randy Travis's experience are at "About," Nashville Palace, last modified 2016, https://www.nashville-palace.com/about.

lilacs and strawberries and page-boy mice tend the King's elephant collection." Yet, Hieronymous had to acknowledge the contrastingly mundane, moneymaking side of the Land of Make Believe. With less flowery prose, she indicated that it shared a space with Loretta Lynn's western wear store, jutted up against the Fiddler's Motel, and cost adults $1.00 and children $0.50. That story also indicated that, during the Christmas season, the Land of Make Believe expected its traffic to "equal that of the Grand Ole Opry."[98] What this last point suggests is that the Tichenor exhibit, strange as it seems, was intended to compete with the Opry, which was still the most famous recurring performance in country music. Although Opryland brought out-of-town guests, the Land of Make Believe seemed to be aimed more at Nashvillians who were already familiar with Tichenor's puppetry from the library or local radio and T.V. shows. The Land of Make Believe, although surrounded by explicity commercialism and popular culture, was a hyperlocal attraction and represents an important caveat to the concerns expressed by Hartford and Hall before the Ryman moved.

Less than a decade before all this development started, Opryland's planners were decrying the businesses that surround tourist attractions. The development of Music Valley district shows how the same so-called "honky-tonk commercialism" they sought to flee in the Lower Broad followed them out to the suburbs. Honky-tonk commercialism has multiple meanings. It cannot be understood without thinking about country music, but, more generally, could refer to organic development and the sense of authenticity that comes along with such growth. The next and final chapter will explore how the park

[98] Information about the display comes from Clara Hieronymous, "'Land of Make Believe' Comes Alive in House," *The Tennessean*, April 3, 1977, 1-E, 4-E, Tennessee Electronic Library; biographic information about Tichenor comes from Carrie Ferguson, "Longtime puppeteer Tom Tichenor dies; services set at 1:45 p.m. today," *The Tennessean*, Nov. 20, 1992, 4-B, Tennessee Electronic Library.

shifted their focuses in the 1990s in ways that suggest they were responding to the changes in Music Valley. By the 1980s, Opryland seemed to recognize that some degree of honky-tonking—in all its senses—was going to be necessary for business commercial success. Looking out at a supposed suburban refuge that had disappeared within years, how could they not?

CHAPTER III
Constructing 'Country America': Opryland's Last Decade

Nadine Hubbs, in her study *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, pinpoints the beginning of a contemporary "redneck" culture around the turn of the 1970s. This period in time was marked by several hit movies about working-class identity and "redneck, trucker, CB radio, and country music fads." Historian Bruce Schulman identified a particular audience for these 1970s trends: what he terms "demi-rednecks," middle-class folks who adopted white working-class identities while retaining a bourgeois economic status. New southern migrants "were not redneck by birth, fewer still rednecks by social position," writes Schulman. "But they adopted the term *redneck* as a badge of honor, a fashion statement, a gesture of resistance against high taxes, liberals, racial integration, women's liberation, and hippies. … Millions of middle-class and upper-class Americans became 'half a redneck.'"[99]

This era of "redneck chic, during which "trendy white Americans … affected phony southern drawls, dressed up in Levi's and cowboy boots, sipped Lone Star and Pabst longnecks, tuned into Waylon and Willie, and hankered for meals of fried pork chops, grits, greens, and biscuits and gravy," rolled into the early '80s popularity of *Urban Cowboy*.[100] To this day, many white Americans purchase, consume, and wear

[99] Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 64-67; Schulman is qtd. in this same source.
[100] Patrick Huber, "A Short History of *Redneck*: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity," *Southern Cultures* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 159.

things associated with the "white working-class" while retaining the class privilege that allows them to be so selective in how they craft their identity. This group of consumers—with the disposable income and time to spend on theme parks, luxury hotels, and concert tickets but superficially working-class tastes—was exactly who Opryland was catering to in the last decade of its existence. Moving away from the diverse, generically American image that Nashville tried to present in the 1970s, Opryland shifted in the 1990s to a pitch that Nashville itself was an authentic American place, which resulted in the current shift of tourism to downtown.

Despite the company's initially diverse presentation of American music and aversion to "honky-tonk commercialism," the last decade before Opryland closed was marked by appeals to this class of consumers that saw themselves as members of a culturally conservative Country America. I borrow the concept of Country America from the magazine of the same name started in 1989 as a joint venture of several companies within the larger Gaylord-Opryland network.[101] Opryland achieved this shift by swerving the park's marketing and events away from the seemingly diverse earlier model to ones focused solely on Nashville's country music scene, attaching themselves to "country" industries including NASCAR, Christian music, and firearms, and becoming early investors in the literal honky tonks which are now the center of Nashville's tourism industry. These changes were demonstrated in advertising, in-park programing, and business moves within and outside the Gaylord-Opryland company.

[101] Timeline released by Opryland USA, "Milestones in the History of Gaylord Entertainment Company," 1997, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.

Before getting into these other business decisions, it is worthwhile to first explain what corporate changes happened within and around Opryland itself during this time period. National Life and Accident, the original parent company of WSM and Opryland, was bought out in the early 1980s by American General Insurance. However, Gaylord Broadcasting, owned by an Oklahoma media magnate and billionaire, purchased nearly all of National Life and Accident's former properties in 1983. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Opryland gradually lost its place as its new parent company, Gaylord Entertainment's, crown jewel to expansions into cable television, Nashville tourism, and retail stores.[102]

The period of change this chapter analyzes began around 1987, when Opryland put out a brochure with the tagline "You're About to Enter a Very Special Country!" The brochure went on to describe the "Opryland USA Passport," a special ticket that provided access to several attractions in and around Opryland including a "tour of Music City," which would take visitors out of the confines of the previously self-contained park. The only image featured on the inside of the brochure showed an idealized, racialized country scene: two white men in western wear and two white women in gingham dresses singing in front of a lit-up sign reading "COUNTRY."[103] Another brochure from 1991 leaned into this play on the word "country." Under subheadings like "The Best of Country Showtime," "The Place for Country Fun," and "The Home of Country Stars," this brochure painted a picture of Opryland as a place solely dedicated to the celebration of country music. "There's no place else in the world where you can see country stars and

[102] Bob Millard, "Opryland USA," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 380.
[103] Brochure for Opryland USA, "You're About to Enter a Very Special Country," 1987, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.

country music, where you can have as much country fun, as you can any day at Opryland," it read. And, in its description of shows, only two performances highlighted—"And The Winner Is…," a celebration of award-winning music of all genres, and ""The Laughing Place," a humorous show for children—were not described in the language of country music.[104] These promotional materials revise the reality of Opryland, presenting it as a country music theme park, a far cry from the broad "Home of American Music" of the 1970s. But the other sections of the original theme park—including the hill country and Western sections which could be wrapped into country music history and the "jazz and blues" area that was ahistorically written out of country history—still existed. Guests coming to the park in this era of "country fun" could still walk through a makeshift French Quarter or ride a log flume in an imagined Appalachia, even as the company downplayed these parts of their park in their marketing.

As the brochures reveal, music was still a central part of Opryland's identity. That had not disappeared. However, along with pushing country music at the expense of other genres, the company became involved in the Christian music industry. David W. Stowe has written that Christian pop music, which first appeared in the early 1970s, "helped baby boomers and their offspring form an image of religion that reinforced the messages delivered with increasing effectiveness by conservative evangelicals and the Religious Right" of "family values" and "traditional morality."[105] By the 1990s, Christian music, American evangelicalism, political conservatism, and corporate capitalism were all closely associated with one another. These connections certainly would have been on the

[104] Brochure for Opryland USA, "Opryland '91: The Original Country Hit," 1991, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[105] David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2-3, Google Books.

mind of the Opryland Music Group when they signed the Christian songwriter and performer Michael W. Smith in 1996.[106] Smith, however, was just the big catch of Opryland Music Group's brand new Christian Music Division, which signed several more artists and acquired other smaller labels.[107]

The company's new division's association with political and cultural conservatism was made especially blatant in April 1997 when they "rolled out a new Family Values Entertainment division … to capitalize on the fast-growing Christian music industry." For Gaylord Entertainment, contemporary Christian music offered more room for their business to grow than country music did.[108] Plus, Christian music would always sell with a group of consumers who, due to personal convictions plus constant moral messaging from politicians and pastors, rejected much mainstream culture that did not align with "family values." Terry London, who took over as chief operating officers following E. W. "Bud" Wendell's retirement in 1997, said much the same, defending his company's decision to invest in Christian music by stating: "We believe there are a lot of people in the United States who want to see entertainment that is based upon traditional values." He summarized Gaylord Entertainment's ethos as "country roots and family values."[109] These large-scale changes impacted the park's programming too. During

[106] Timeline released by Opryland USA.
[107] Valerie Hansen, "OMG's New Christian Music Division Introduces Our First Writer/Producer," *OMG Times*, January, 1996, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[108] Will Pinkston, "Gaylord Singing New Song: Family Values Division Will Capitalize on Christianity," *The Tennessean*, April 6, 1997, 1E, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[109] Will Pinkston, "In Wendell's Wake, Gaylord Focusing on Family Values," *The Tennessean*, April 11, 1997, 1A-2A, Tennessee Electronic Library.

Opryland's last season open, for instance, it hosted a Gospel Music Week with over 20 Christian artists performing in the park.[110]

Opryland's investment in "family values" and Christian music was just one of the transformative business move of the late 1980s and '90s. A virtual country music empire emerged from all these moves and mergers. This empire, consisting of the Grand Ole Opry, two country cable networks, a country music publishing company, the Opryland Hotel, the General Jackson, and the theme park, was described in a 1993 article in *Fortune* magazine. The article begins by recognizing the growing appeal of country music, claiming that the genre is no longer "strictly truck-stop fare" but, much like the "redneck" trends of the '70s, a music for the well-off that can be heard "at a Connecticut clambake or poolside in L.A." And Gaylord Entertainment is the genre's most prominent marketers. A security analyst quoted in the piece describes the company "as a country music wheel with the Grand Ole Opry as the hub," suggesting that the company is a wide network of related businesses all dedicated to the "country" experience.[111] The years shortly before and after that article's publication were some of the company's biggest periods of growth. *Country America*, a magazine aimed at folks for whom "Country is more than music," hit newsstands in 1989.[112] Gaylord Entertainment went public in 1991. Fiesta Texas, a San Antonio theme park which Gaylord held significant stock in, opened in 1992. The company partnered with Bass Pro Shops, a company widely associated with "country" pastimes like hunting and fishing, to plan building an "sporting goods

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[110] "Christian Artists Spread the Word at Opryland," *The Tennessean*, March 27, 1997, 4D, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[111] Andrew E. Serwer, "Gaylord Entertainment: Stand by Your Core Franchise," *Fortune*, January 25, 1993, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[112] Quote comes from Robert K. Oermann, "TNN to Offer Magazine for Its Fans," *The Tennessean*, February 2, 1989, 3-D, Tennessee Electronic Library.

superstore near Opryland USA" in 1993. Then, in 1995, they teamed up with NASCAR to plan NASCAR Thunder, a chain of retail stores selling racing merchandise.[113] *Country America* plus the Bass Pro and NASCAR partnerships are three ventures that show the company's pivot not just toward country music—which, being strongly associated to Nashville, makes complete sense—but to a broader "country" lifestyle and identity that appealed to many American consumers.

The park's embrace of Country America forced Opryland to engage in a process of historical resurrection. The first iteration of Opryland, which presented a version of American history, relied on historicizing categories of people and things. But to make their business decisions in the 1990s make sense, Opryland had to rescue some of these people, objects, and activities from the past it had imagined and fit them into. The strongest example of this relates to Opryland's representation of craftspeople. An early '70s Opryland-themed issue of *Our Shield*, the newsletter of National Life and Accident, firmly situated the park's "Hill Country" section in the past. This area of the park was decorated with "Appalachian mountain town artifacts" and the staff members dressed "in their authentic costumes of the day." The Hill Country portrayed a moment in time without "modern electric machines to handle the work." Though the newsletter doesn't mention a specific time period, there was a clear demarcation between the "modern" present of the 1970s and the pre-modern past of "those days" in the Hill Country. The main attraction of this section of the park were the "master craftsmen," including potters, woodcarvers, weavers, and luthiers. Visitors could observe these men and women "at

[113] Dates come from Timeline released by Opryland USA. Both "fishing" and "poaching deer" are included in a list of stereotypically "redneck" activities in Huber, "A Short History of *Redneck*," 148.

work … making items the old-fashioned way."[114] These laborers, rather than being normal, modern people who used traditional methods to create goods, were turned by their costumes and surroundings into pieces of history that stood out from the modern aspects of Opryland. If we think about the history of country music, artists like Loretta Lynn and Buck Owens were at this same point in time being praised for their return to "traditional" sounds. But the craftspeople of "Country America" were being pushed into the past.

About twenty years later, though, things had shifted. Craftspeople were suddenly thrust back into the present at Opryland. In the summer of 1991, Opryland presented a three-week Country America Lifestyles Festival dedicated to "celebrating today's country lifestyles"—a modern version of country culture. A crucial piece of this celebration of this style of "living … rich in tradition" were the craftspeople and artisans invited to show off their works. "Festival exhibitors," a press release announced, "represent some of America's most interesting and entertaining artisans." These exhibitors included Elvin King, a sculptor from nearby Sewanee known for peeling apples with a chainsaw, and an unnamed blacksmith from Hermann, Missouri, who made "furniture and jewelry fashioned from horseshoes and nails."[115] In part, these descriptions mirror the presentation of craftspeople from the 1970s in the way they are presented as exhibits to be watched rather than engaged with. But, overall, there is no sense that these artisans are relics of the past or actors merely playing a role that no longer exists in

[114] Newsletter from National Life and Accident.
[115] Press release from Dye, Van Mol & Lawrence Public Relations, "Opryland's New Festival Celebrates Country America Lifestyles," May 13, 1991, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee. A photograph of Elvin King is available at "Farewell to Festival," *The Tennessean,* July 26, 1991, 22, Tennessee Electronic Library.

modern society. To construct the idea of Country America, Opryland had to reclaim these trades and show that they were a storied but still existing part of the present day.

Besides resurrecting country crafts from history, the Country America Lifestyles Festival was a clear example of Opryland's pivot to a broad, all-encompassing country lifestyle. The park's promotional materials, however, never give a clear definition of what the "country lifestyle" is. The best estimate is that it involves things as wide-ranging as "NASCAR, Bill Dance, Chef Hans, Holly Dunn … a chainsaw sculptor" plus "bread baking and basket making … bass fishing and buck dancing." A vast list of people, things, and activities vaguely associated with countryness. Yes, country music was a part of the event—Ricky Skaggs, Graham Brown, Holly Dunn, Crystal Gale, and Steve Wariner all performed at the festival—but not the majority of it. The festival had four components: "A Taste of Country, The Great Outdoors, Country Traditions and Country Fun." In addition to the aforementioned craftsmen and country stars, famous anglers came for fishing demonstrations and cooks prepared food. As a preview for the festival put it, the festival was a celebration of all things "un-urban."[116] This language evokes the same desire for escape from the city that the Opry utilized in the 1960s and '70s. It also reveals how the space of Opryland became associated with rurality and country life despite its obvious suburban location and proximity to decidedly un-country things like highways and fast food.

Although the best example, the Country America Lifestyles Festival was just one of several programs at Opryland that reflected the broader changes happening within the

[116] Timeline released by Opryland USA; Press release from Dye, Van Mol & Lawrence Public Relations. The term "un-urban" comes from Joe Rogers, "Opryland's Fest Goes Country," *The Tennessean*, June 22, 1991, 6D, Tennessee Electronic Library.

company. Two key examples were the Nashville On Stage series in the park each summer and a Country Christmas Gun Show held at the Opryland Hotel in 1995. Nashville On Stage started in 1994 as a way to compete for tourists with Branson, Missouri, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, two other destinations in Country America.[117] It soon became the signature musical performance in the park's advertising. This signaled a move away from the genre-spanning "Home of American Music" and an attempt to turn Nashville's own identity as a country music city into the pitch for why anyone should visit Opryland. Nashville On Stage even offered party packages with themes like "What's For Brunch, Grandpa?" and "Hoot 'n' Holler Hoedown." These menus, boasting a bevy of southern food like "finger-lickin' barbeque chicken and fresh fried river catfish, caught by ole Uncle Parsons himself," appealed to and capitalized on nostalgia for rural life of bygone days.[118] The gun show appealed to a similar audience in a different way. The show meant the conversion of the Opryland Hotel's 65,000 square foot convention center into a market for the "buying, selling and trading of some of the world's most sought after firearms." It was organized by Wally Beinfield, a firearms collector and dealer described as having a "missionary zeal" for the industry.[119] Like Christian pop music and the outdoors activities promoted by Bass Pro Shops, guns became increasingly associated with political conservatism after the Civil Rights Era.[120]

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[117] Joe Hall, "Nashville On Stage to Debut for Opryland's 1994 Season," *Nashville Business Journal*, July 1993, 28.
[118] Nashville On Stage Theme Party menus, mid-1990s, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[119] Press release from Multi-Media Advertising, "Nashville's Opryland Hotel Site of Famous Opryland Country Christmas Gun Show November 17 – 19," September 22, 1995, Opryland file folder, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Frist Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.
[120] A good summary of this transformation can be found in WNYC Studios, "The Gun Show," *Radiolab Presents: More Perfect*, podcast audio, February 23, 2018, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/radiolab-presents-more-perfect-gun-show.

In Country America, guns were an emblem of one's distrust of government bureaucracy, repudiation of liberal niceness, and belief in individual liberty. These are not associations that could have been missed by Opryland.

While Opryland was turning into a place for Country America to spend their summers, Gaylord Entertainment was pouring money back into downtown Nashville. Ironically enough, they paid $8.5 million to finally refurbish the Ryman Auditorium and begin holding regular concerts there again. Another major project was the Wildhorse Saloon, a massive honky tonk completed in 1994. With "stages for live music, a dance club that could hold 1,600 people, facilities for televising live performances, and a restaurant and several bars," the Wildhorse was practically indistinguishable from the hole-in-the-wall beer joints of old.[121] These new projects not only further solidified Gaylord absorption of "honky-tonk commercialism" but paved the way for today's Lower Broad, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

[121] Timeline released by Opryland USA; Hill, *Country Comes to Town*, 115.

CONCLUSION
Digital Historical Memory, Tourism, and Community in a Theme Park City

Opryland USA closed on the last day of 1997. Soon, a mall called Opry Mills and vast parking lots would occupy the space, next to the Opry House and Gaylord-Opryland Hotel, where Opryland once was. Gaylord Entertainment, in announcing the decision, promised Opryland's loyal fans that the mall would be home to a new concept combining the retail stores Gaylord needed to bring in more revenue and the entertainment and rides that Opryland was known for.[122] But that promise fell flat. In reality, Opry Mills is just another outlet mall. It has a Bass Pro Shop, a wax museum, and a movie theater but that's about it. Trust me, I would know. I spent last summer working at Brooks Brothers.

The *Tennessean* article that broke the news of Opryland's closing a few months before its last day talked of "Opryland's faithful." There were families, church groups, and schools that visited Opryland annually. They were shocked by the company's seeming disloyalty to them and worried about the loss of the park's "wholesome atmosphere."[123] The night that Opryland closed, hundreds showed up to take their last tour of the grounds, celebrate the memories, and mourn the loss. "We'll be here until the last song wafts from the rafters … It's a really sad time for us. … I think they're making a major, major mistake," said one Opryland fan, Mary Jane Thompson. She was there on

[122] Will Pinkston, "Death of a Theme Park: Opryland Shifts to Retail," *The Tennessean*, October 30, 1997, 1A, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[123] Pinkston, "Death of a Theme Park."

opening day in 1972 with her husband David and had pushed all of her children through the park as children, so that space obviously held a special place in her heart. Mary Deason, an entrance host at the park for five years, noticed the sour mood. "Everybody's negative about the park closing," she said.[124]

The mixture of sadness and appreciation expressed that day by Opryland's visitors is still around today. But it's expressed digitally. On Facebook, former employees try to track down old co-workers and Opryland fans share old photos and search for recipes for park food.[125] In a recent podcast episode, three new fathers reminisced about the place where "a bunch of ten- to thirteen-year-old kids were running around … unsupervised," discussed their favorite rides, and speculated about why Opryland might have actually closed.[126] On Reddit, when news broke that a new waterpark connected to the Gaylord-Opryland Hotel would not be open to the public, members of r/Nashville expressed their anger and shared ways to get around the rule by renting a party room.[127] In all these digital spaces, Opryland's memory is able to live on and the community that it once fostered is able to exist in part, even if not face-to-face and surrounded by the Opryland atmosphere.

The central mystery of Opryland's brief existence—and of this project—is how Opryland became such a beloved feature of Nashville's landscape that it warranted

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[124] Catherine Trevison, "Sun Sets on Opryland Park," *The Tennessean*, January 1, 1998, 1E, Tennessee Electronic Library.
[125] "Opryland Memories," Facebook, created March 10, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/groups/OprylandUSA/.
[126] "Opryland USA – Raising Nashville Episode 2," *Raising Nashville*, podcast audio, March 17, 2019, https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-zucyw-ab24c8?utm_campaign=w_share_ep&utm_medium=dlink&utm_source=w_share.
[127] DylanAllen, "How Locals Can Get into Opryland's New SoundWaves Water Park," Reddit, June 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/nashville/comments/bsijzi/how_locals_can_get_into_oprylands_new_soundwaves/.

mourning. For Bud Wendell, it's because Opryland and Gaylord Entertainment invested in the community, donating to local nonprofits and sponsoring community events.[128] Journalist Alan Nelson credited the park's local success with the oil crisis of the late '70s, which ground Americans' vacations to a halt and caused Nashvillians to step up to support the park.[129] In my view, the answer is a lot simpler. Opryland was a lot of fun, and things always seem great when they're about to disappear. I also think that, like Eric Avila and the authors of *Suburban Nation* suggested about Disneyland, Opryland was a place of escape. It catered to a mostly white, suburban, and southern audience that was figuring out life following the Civil Rights Era. They turned to conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan, evangelical preachers like Jerry Falwell, and acceptable destinations like Opryland USA.

Now, to the Nashville of today. Looking out from the rooftop bar at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, I can see two places. One, the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, has been a Nashville institution and a feature of the Lower Broad landscape since May 1947.[130] Next door, Alan Jackson's Good Time Bar—one of many multistory, celebrity-branded honky-tonks—opened seventy years later in May 2017.[131] They both have signs outside advertising the same thing. On the marquee above Ernest Tubb's: "REAL COUNTRY MUSIC / LIVES HERE / OUR 72ND YEAR." In neon on the window of Alan Jackson's: "Real Country Music / Played Here!" That's the same stuff Opryland was selling all

[128] Wendell in discussion with the author.
[129] Nelson, "Opryland USA Groundbreaking."
[130] Ronnie Pugh, "Ernest Tubb," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 522.
[131] Michelle Darrisaw, "AJ's Good Time Bar in Nashville Is Now Open – Here's a Look at All Four Floors," *Southern Living*, July 17, 2017, https://www.southernliving.com/news/alan-jackson-ajs-good-time-bar-nashville-now-open.

those years ago, right? With the conclusion of this thesis, I would like to suggest that, in some ways, Opryland's shadow never left. The commercial claims of authenticity are still a main point made by downtown Nashville's promoters. And people are still buying it. Apart from the recent closures due to COVID-19, Broadway bars are almost constantly jam-packed with guests.

But the detractors are still there, too. Tyler Mahan Coe, host of the *Cocaine and Rhinestones* podcast, a personal favorite of mine, told *Rolling Stone*, "If I lived in another country and someone described Nashville to me, and I went to Broadway, I'd be pissed."[132] Nashville's downtown district—the same Lower Broad that was once left behind—has become the epicenter of a theme park city. When I worked in downtown Nashville, it didn't feel like the focal point of a—for lack of a better word—real, organic city. The closest place that emulated that feeling was the Nashville Arcade, but to get there I had to venture from the parking garage of a massive convention center, past ridiculously commercial honky tonks and luxury hotels. The neighborhood has moved from "honky-tonk commercialism," that was at least partially built from the ground up, to a "Honky Tonk Industrial Complex." The bars today play all kinds of music, rake in cash for celebrity musicians, and bear self-parodic names like Kid Rock's Big Ass Honky Tonk and Rock 'n' Roll Steakhouse.[133] That started with Gaylord Entertainment's Wildhorse Saloon and has created a place that's inhospitable to longtime residents and transplants alike.

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[132] Joseph Hudak, "Nashville Beyond Downtown: The Best Music Clubs and Hidden Hangouts," *Rolling Stone*, February 1, 2020, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/nashville-downtown-best-music-clubs-hidden-hangouts-938229/.
[133] Steve Cavendish, "R.I.P. 'It City,'" *Nashville Scene*, May 23, 2019, https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/cover-story/article/21069569/rip-it-city.

In the *Rolling Stone* article, which was a list of hidden gems to visit in Nashville, Coe went on to recommend a less popular place, for those not in the know at least: American Legion Post 82 in East Nashville, where young and old locals come to dance every Honky Tonk Tuesday Night.[134] I've been there before, and it really is a lot of fun. Within the concrete walls, the older crowd that probably makes up 99-percent of patrons of all other American Legion halls was there. But so were, an East Nashvillian transplant friend of mine pointed out, members of the local Democratic Socialists of America chapter. And Charley Crockett, a young country singer who'd just finished up a performance on the Opry. And dozens of other people you'd never expect to see drinking, dancing, and singing together. Honky Tonk Tuesday is a cross-section of Nashville's people and its challenges.

I enjoyed places like the American Legion for the same reason as Coe. But my distaste for Broadway is precisely the reason that others go to those downtown honky tonks: "real country music." The search for authenticity is an inevitable part of tourism. We leave our houses to experience reality from another perspective, so why would we want that experience to be faked? History shows that tourism can be both corrupting and enriching. In the case of Nashville, the decisions of tourist operations like Opryland and its successors have caused rent to spike, forced out longtime residents, and turned the city into a sprawling, centerless one. Its residential and commercial spaces—especially those accessible to everyday, working people—are sprawled across Davidson County. Its outer bounds are pushing into the countryside rather than building up the core. It's extremely

[134] Hudak, "Nashville Beyond Downtown."

difficult to navigate without a car. These facts of life in Nashville have deleterious effects especially on Black communities.[135]

Our responses to these challenges must emerge from a place that is both critical and caring. We must be willing to think critically about the businesses and attractions that we support, how we behave within them, and the kind of policies about tourism that we support. As tourists, we have to think of travel as more than just taking and consuming. As residents, we must put the needs of the most vulnerable local communities first. That's true in Nashville, Oxford, and beyond.

[135] The concept of a "centerless city" is borrowed from Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 265-266. My information about gentrification in Nashville comes from personal observations and Grace Tatter, "Fighting to Save a Gentrifying East Nashville," *Scalawag*, May 4, 2018, https://www.scalawagmagazine.org/2018/05/fighting-to-save-a-gentrifying-east-nashville/.

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