1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Ryman Auditorium

Other Name/Site Number: Union Gospel Tabernacle

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 116 Fifth Avenue North Not for publication:___

City/Town: Nashville Vicinity:___

State: TN County: Davidson Code: 037 Zip Code: 37219

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property		Category of Property	
Private:	X	Building(s):	X
Public-Local:	___	District:	___
Public-State:	___	Site:	___
Public-Federal:	___	Structure:	___
		Object:	___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	_____ buildings
_____	_____ sites
_____	_____ structures
_____	_____ objects
1	_____ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing:

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

_X__ Entered in the National Register
___ Determined eligible for the National Register
___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
___ Removed from the National Register
___ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic:	Religion	Sub:	Religious Facility
	Recreation and Culture	Sub:	Auditorium
Current:	Recreation and Culture	Sub:	Auditorium

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late Victorian: Gothic

MATERIALS:

Foundation:	Rock-faced limestone; coursed ashlar; and rock-faced limestone coursed rubble
Walls:	Brick Masonry with limestone and metal detailing
Roof:	Asphalt shingles
Other:	

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Construction of the Ryman Auditorium began in 1888 and was completed in 1892. It is a rectangular, two and-a-half story brick building with Gothic Revival exterior detailing. Although the front of the building was sandblasted in 1957, exterior fabric appears to be in good condition. It is located in an urban setting on the east side of Fifth Avenue North (originally Summer Street), a half block north of Broadway (originally Broad Street) in downtown Nashville. Fifth Avenue slopes to the south, so that the water table on the south side of the building is eight feet above grade. There is a parking lot at the rear of the building.

Architect Hugh Cathcart Thompson with a reputation as one of the leading architects in Nashville at the time, was hired to oversee the construction of the Union Gospel Tabernacle. Thompson set-up his own office in 1875 with many years experience as a carpenter and carpentry contractor, and with more limited experience as an architect.[1] Thompson is credited with the design of several public and private buildings throughout Nashville.[2]

Exterior: The 12 bay front (west) elevation is 120 feet wide and the side (north and south) elevations are 178 feet wide. A gable roof covers the main auditorium space. A narrow gable roof covers the original rear two-story vestibule. All roof surfaces have asphalt shingles. The parapets are now capped with pressed metal. Originally, there were small crockets along most of the parapets, as well as on what were the stepped gables of the front facade.

The foundation on the main (west) elevation is rock-faced limestone coursed ashlar; this continues for the first three bays of the south elevation; the remainder is rock-faced limestone coursed rubble. There is a smooth-dressed limestone water table. The walls are constructed of a dark red brick, laid in stretcher bond. On the front facade there are molded brick archivolts in blind arcades. In addition, there are limestone and pressed metal stringcourses, drip moldings, sills, hoodmolds, and offsets on the corner pier buttresses. A key feature centered at the second-story level of the main facade is a limestone aedicular panel in the Decorated Gothic Style which bears the inscription, “Union Gospel Tabernacle.” A brick chimney with corbeled top rises above both the northeast and southeast corner piers of the original portion of the rear of the building.

There are four aluminum and glass doors beneath each of the two blunt-pointed arches on the front (west) facade. Originally, there was a double wood door under each arch. Double five- or six-panel doors are located at various entrances and exits: two pairs on right (south) six pairs on the original portion of the east (rear) elevation, and two pairs on the north (left) elevation.

Most of the windows have pointed arches and one-over-one-light sash; the upper sections of the windows are now fixed in place. The decorated Gothic windows in the gable end arch on the rear facade have been paneled over, and stained glass was placed in the front lancet windows in 1966.

Two sets of fire steps lead from the sidewalk on the Fifth Street facade to the main lobby. Limestone steps, situated within the two arched entryways, lead from the alley along the south (right) of the building to the backstage area. A similar arrangement occurs at the rear of the building. However, rather than leading directly to the street, the rear doors open into a sympathetic but modern, two-story brick, flat-roofed addition that was added to the rear (east) of the building in 1994. The addition is offset slightly from the main part of the building

[1] William G. Howell, “Hugh Cathcart Thompson: Native Tennessee Architect,” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1975), 27, 45.

[2] Howell, “Hugh Cathcart Thompson: Native Tennessee Architect.”

and therefore is difficult to see from the sides and is not visible at all from the front. The first floor houses the box office, a gift shop, a concession stand, and restrooms, while the second floor provides space for administrative offices, a break room, another concession stand, and restrooms. The second floor is accessed either by an elevator or by a grand staircase. Original doors, windows, and brickwork are visible from within the addition.

Interior: The structural system consists of framing and masonry bearing walls. Originally, the first floor had seating for about 3,000 in benches arranged in concentric south-facing rows for three quarters of a circle around a pulpit. In 1897, the seating capacity was doubled with the construction of a semicircular balcony. Resting on iron posts, the balcony curves around the auditorium beginning above the 10th row of benches on the main floor. Concentric rows of benches extend all the way to the north wall. In addition, the second floor balcony houses halls which cross the west and east ends of the building.

In 1901, the seating capacity of the auditorium was drastically reduced to 3,500 with the construction of the stage on the first floor. The stage is situated along the south (right) side of the 120 foot by 140 foot auditorium. In 1904 and 1906, the stage facilities were improved to include dressing rooms and property storage. Further improvements in the backstage area were made between 1941 and 1974. Across the west (front) and east (rear) of the building is a narrow lobby, with stairs rising both to the north and south.

Open well, two-run stairs are located at each of the four corners of the building. These iron stairs were made by the National Foundry and Machine Company, Louisville, Kentucky.

Pine floorboards are used throughout the auditorium, walls are plaster, and the ceiling consists of boards running east to west. Paired double doors are located under the two arches between each lobby space and the auditorium, on both floors, at both the front and rear of the original portion of the building. It is worth noting that the original pine church benches remain. The ends of the benches have incised pointed arches and applied roundels.[3]

A sensitive renovation of Ryman Auditorium was undertaken in 1992 under new ownership. A rear, two-story addition was constructed in anticipation of its new role as an events venue.

[3] Major portions of the building's description were derived from J. A Chewning, and Jack E. Boucher, photographers, *Union Gospel Tabernacle (Ryman Auditorium, Grand Ole Opry House*) (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, 1979).

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
Nationally: X Statewide: __ Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria:	A X B __ C __ D
Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):	A __ B __ C __ D __ E __ F __ G X
NHL Criteria:	1; Exception 8
NHL Theme(s):	III. Expressing Cultural Values: 6. Popular and Traditional Culture
Areas of Significance:	Entertainment/Recreation
Period(s) of Significance:	1943-1974
Significant Dates:	1943-1974
Significant Person(s):	
Cultural Affiliation:	N/A
Architect/Builder:	Hugh C. Thompson
Historic Context:	XXII. Music D. Popular J. Forums (Halls and Auditoriums) K. Performers Soloists and Ensembles N. Music for Radio and Television

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Summary

Between 1943 and 1974, the Ryman Auditorium was home to country music's *Grand Ole Opry*. The *Opry's* live shows and radio program—the longest-running in American history—played a pivotal role in the evolution, dissemination and commercialization of country music. The *Opry* transformed a regional and largely rural cultural expression to a phenomenon of national and worldwide appeal. Ryman Auditorium, as the premier home of the *Grand Ole Opry*, is the building most closely associated with the origins and rise of the modern-day genre of country music in the United States. For this reason, it is eligible for designation under National Historic Landmarks Criterion 1.

History

The cultural expression now known as "country music" emerged in the American South in the 1920s. This traditional, rural music was first recorded by Polk Brockman of Okeh Records in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1923. Brockman recorded Fiddlin' John Carson, a regular performer on Atlanta Radio Station WSB, the first high-powered radio station in the South. Brockman immediately sold the first press of 500 copies and released 1,000 more, which sold in a matter of days.[4] Brockman was among a group of record company executives looking to diversify their offerings to compete with the new medium of radio. Radio offered for free the same product the record companies were selling, and remained the most important means of country music dissemination.

Performers such as Carson were often utilized by Southern radio stations because they could play for varying lengths of time as necessary between scheduled programs. In addition, their non-union status made payment unnecessary. Because traditional rural musicians were barred from membership in the American Society of Composers and Publishers and the American Federation of Musicians, they were effectively prohibited from performing professionally or publishing their work. Consequently, many were semi-professionals who combined performing at radio stations, public events and barn-dances with whatever work they could find. The utilization of their talent, both by the radio stations and record companies like Okeh, helped increase the popularity of rural music in the South during the 1920s.[5]

Traditional music was primarily marketed to rural audiences in the South and Midwest until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Responding to the increasing popularity of the genre, radio station WBAP in Dallas, Texas, created the first "radio barn dance" in 1923. The first radio station to broadcast this music genre nationally was WSM in Nashville, Tennessee in 1925. While the station was not the first to attempt to popularize the genre, nor was the "WSM Barn Dance" the first show of its kind, the station and its show ultimately proved to be the most influential.[6]

---

[4] University of Virginia American Studies Department. "This Land is Your Land: Rural Music and the Depression." Online essay from AS@UVA Project, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/RADIO/c_w/cw-front.html, 1988.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

WSM, George Hay and the Birth of the *Grand Ole Opry*

When WSM went on the air in 1925, stations across the South and Midwest were already following WBAP's lead and broadcasting their own radio barn dance programs. Chicago station WLS began what would become its popular National Barn Dance in 1924 and it was that show's announcer, George Hay, who brought the format to WSM.[7] WSM began as the "toy" of Edwin Craig, whose father, Cornelius, was president of Nashville's National Life and Accident Company. Fascinated with the emergent medium of radio, Edwin Craig convinced his father of its potential as a marketing tool for the company. In 1924, the company started its own station, WSM (for "We Shield Millions") in a state-of-the-art facility on the fifth floor of its new downtown building at Seventh and Union.[8] With 1,000 watts of power, WSM was one of the two strongest radio stations in the South, and among the top 15 percent in strength in the country, thus ensuring its ability to reach the large, working-class rural population to whom National Life wished to market its "industrial life insurance."[9] Country music historian Charles Wolfe has noted that:

> "By the end of October 1925 all the basic elements for the *Opry* were in place: a powerful radio station located in an area rich in folk tradition; a backing company with impressive assets and (with Edwin Craig at least) a dedication to the principles of commercial radio; and an eager and enthusiastic audience just learning and growing accustomed to the benefits of a new entertainment medium. What these elements needed was a catalyst, and that they got when, on November 2, 1925, WSM hired George D. Hay to manage the station."[10]

Hay was a former court reporter for the Memphis (Tennessee) Commercial Appeal and announcer and radio editor for the paper when he was hired by the Sears Company as an announcer on their new station, WLS ("World's Largest Store"), in Chicago. As an "all-purpose announcer," Hay's varied shows included the WLS Barn Dance program inaugurated in 1924. According to Wolfe:

> "Contrary to popular belief, Hay did not start the Barn Dance but was only an announcer. He was, however, deeply impressed by the success of the program and the way it attracted such a large, loyal, and primarily rural audience. He had been impressed earlier with this sort of music when . . . he had attended a country hoedown in a log cabin near Mammoth Springs [Arkansas]. Hay now saw this same spirit being successfully fitted to the new medium of radio, as through 1924 and 1925 the WLS Barn Dance became the first totally successful radio show featuring old-time music."[11]

In 1924, Radio Digest Magazine awarded Hay a gold cup for being the nation's most popular radio announcer. This distinction, combined with Hay's familiarity with Tennessee and his experience dealing with rural audiences, made him an obvious selection as program director for the fledgling WSM station.[12] Hay arrived in November of 1925, to find the station's programming directed toward the rather sophisticated tastes of 1920s Nashville, a college town and major financial center. Nashville's cultural image was projected through the

---

[7] Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 1999).
[8] Jerry Strobel, ed., *Grand Ole Opry Picture-History Book*. (Nashville: WSM Broadcasting Company), 117-118.
[9] Charles K. Wolfe, radio interview on "The Fine Print," Nashville Public Radio, June 26, 1999.
[10] Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 26.
[11] Ibid., 28.
[12] Ibid.

programming of light or semi-classical music, string quartets, and dance bands. The station did occasionally feature traditional musicians in between set shows. These artists were often regulars at Nashville's low-wattage station, WDAD, and were glad for the exposure, however infrequent, WSM offered.[13]

Knowing that the station's strong signal had the potential to reach a huge audience outside the downtown Nashville area, Hay insisted on a programming change to include more fare intended to appeal to rural audiences. On November 28, 1925, Hay invited fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson, a relative of WSM studio pianist Eva Thompson Jones, to play on the air. An enthusiastic listener response followed the one-hour program, and on Saturday, December 26, the WSM *Barn Dance* debuted as the station's first regularly-scheduled old-time music show.[14]

The *Barn Dance* quickly became a sensation. Uncle Jimmy became the first member of what would become a large and distinguished company of performers that included Dr. Humphrey Bates and his band, the Possum Hunters; The Gully Jumpers; the Fruit Jar Drinkers and the Crook Brothers. The first real "star" of the company, however, was Uncle Dave Macon, a banjo picker who teamed up with Fiddler Sid Harkreader and toured the South with much success. Macon and Harkreader joined the company at Hay's request in December, 1925.

The addition of "star" talent to the show's roster came just months before the station's power was increased to 5,000 watts. The *Barn Dance* could now be heard over much of the Midwest and its audience grew rapidly. In 1928, WSM was assigned a national clear channel[15] and its signal carried across the country. Its low frequency designation of 650 kilocycles made its broadcasts relatively free of interference.[16] As the *Barn Dance* began to reach a wider audience, favorable cards, letters, and telegrams flooded the station. The program's duration was increased from one to two hours, and then three hours in length, but it was not the only program broadcast on Saturday night.

A classical music program, *The Music Appreciation Hour*, preceded the broadcast of the *Barn Dance* on Saturday nights. One evening in 1927, the program's conductor, Dr. Walter Damrosch, introduced the final selection of the night by saying that most artists accept that there is no place in the classics for realism, however, he was going to break this rule and present a composition by a young composer from Iowa whose latest number depicts the onrush of a locomotive.[17] George Hay introduced the next program, the *Barn Dance*, by saying somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that while the preceding show was devoted to the classics, and according to its conductor there is no room for realism in the classics, the following show would present nothing but realism. It would be down to earth for the earthy.[18] DeFord Bailey began by playing his train imitation, the "Pan American Blues," on the harmonica. After he finished, Hay said, "For the past hour, we have been listening to music taken largely from Grand Opera, but from now on we will present the *Grand Ole Opry*," uttering the words which gave rise to a country music institution.[19] By the following Sunday, the local newspaper used the "Grand Old Op'ry" to refer to the WSM *Barn Dance*, the name caught on and the show was

[13] Wolfe, radio interview, "The Fine Print."
[14] Ibid., 34.
[15] In radio broadcasting clear channel is defined as "a frequency assigned for the exclusive use of one entity." (The Institute for Telecommunications Sciences, "Definition of Clear Channel" http://www.its.bldrdoc.gov/fs-1037/dir-007/_0991.htm (accessed April 25, 2007).
[16] Strobel, *Grand Ole Opry – WSM Picture-History Book*, 118, 121.
[17] William U. Eiland, *Nashville's Mother Church: The History of the Ryman Auditorium* (Nashville: Opryland USA, 1992), 48.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

known as such from there on after. While Hay hoped that the show would remain simple and spontaneous, he lived long enough to see his "down-to-earth" show become a national institution and the longest-lasting program on American radio.[20]

The *Opry's* Move from the WSM Complex

It was a common practice of the time for fans to observe live studio performances. In November 1925, WLS in Chicago became the first radio station in the country to build an audience studio for this purpose. The studio was constructed when the company moved to larger quarters on the sixth floor of the Sherman Hotel in downtown Chicago. The theatre was designed to hold 100 people as well as technical and control room facilities.[21]

Radio became very popular during the Great Depression of the 1930s. People could no longer afford to buy records and instead, they listened to radios they had purchased when times were better. As the *Grand Ole Opry* show grew in popularity during this time, so did the crowds which flocked to the studio during airtime. WSM's studio, however, consisted of a small room with two windows. Initially crowds observed the broadcasts from a corridor outside the studio which had been fitted with an observation window. To cope with the problem, National Life built "Studio 'C'" to accommodate 500 spectators, but this quickly proved inadequate. Hence, in the 1930s, the *Opry* began a series of moves to find a more suitable Nashville venue.

In 1932, WSM constructed an innovative new radio tower. It was the tallest in the nation, at 878 feet, and increased the power watts to 50,000.[22] The broadcast began to draw spectators in unprecedented numbers and it was clear that the current studio could no longer accommodate the show. For a time, WSM was forced to close the broadcast to the public and Hay feared that this would lead to cancellation of the show. "He argued that 'a visible audience was part of our shindig," so the show subsequently moved to the Hillsboro Theatre located in proximity to Vanderbilt University on the west side of downtown Nashville. Although the broadcast was closed to the public, complimentary passes were given to the agents of the National Life building, the location of the first *Opry* broadcast. The passes were distributed to the friends and customers of the National Life agents for two nightly shows. The crowds continued to grow and the show was once again relocated to the Dixie Tabernacle on Fatherland Street in East Nashville in June 1963, with a seating capacity of 3,000. The homeowners in the otherwise quiet neighborhood eventually demanded that the *Opry* take its parking problems, its raucous patrons, and its loud music elsewhere, so the *Opry* moved out of the Dixie Tabernacle in July 1939 after two years of residence.[23]

The *Opry's* next home was the War Memorial Auditorium, but even with a twenty-five cent entrance fee, the facility was quickly overwhelmed, not only in terms of density but in wear and tear. Many of the over 3,000 people who came each week brought their chewing tobacco, gum, and pocket knives to leave their initials in the War Memorial's fine leather seats. As a result, the management of the War Memorial Auditorium asked the *Opry* to find another home. The *Opry* thereafter relocated to the Ryman Auditorium in 1943.[24]

---

[20] Malone, *Country Music*, 75; Kingsbury, *The Grand Ole Opry History of Country Music*, 28

[21] *WLS History*.

[22] This tower still stands. The WSM Radio Transmission Complex was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1981-1982.

[23] Strobel, *Grand Ole Opry: WSM Picture-History Book*, 119; Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 22-23.

[24] Strobel, *Grand Ole Opry: WSM Picture-History Book*, 119; Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 23; See fn. 26 for a detailed discussion surrounding the uncertainty of this date.

Ryman Auditorium

Ryman Auditorium was constructed between 1888 and 1892 as the Union Gospel Tabernacle. It was built by Reverend Samuel Porter Jones, an evangelist who held numerous revival meetings in Nashville from the early 1880s to 1900. Rev. Jones wanted an auditorium where revival meetings and other events of community interest could be held. The catalyst for the auditorium's construction occurred in May 1885 when wealthy riverboat captain Thomas Green Ryman and some of his crew descended on one of Jones's revivals to harass the minister and break up the meeting. Ryman was so overwhelmed by the sermon that he became an immediate follower of Jones. Ryman promptly closed the bars on all his steamers, confiscated the liquor, converted his big dockside saloon to a religious meeting hall, and began a vigorous campaign to build an auditorium for Jones to preach in. Ryman gave generously of his own money and worked tirelessly to raise funds from other sources. By 1888, enough money had been raised to begin construction, and the hand-cut limestone foundation was laid that summer. Construction was completed in 1892.

In the meantime, Rev. Jones continued to help raise money to pay off the debt that his zeal had inspired. In 1900, it was announced that Ryman had carried forward the building debt and the interest on it. Four years later, during Ryman's funeral, Rev. Jones proposed that the Union Gospel Tabernacle be renamed the Ryman Auditorium in honor of the man who perhaps did more to make the building a reality than any other individual. The proposal was approved unanimously.[25]

When originally planned, the auditorium included a balcony which would enable the building to accommodate 6,000. However, the building as completed in 1892 consisted only of a ground floor which could seat about 3,000. The seating capacity was increased in anticipation of the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Celebration in Nashville, when several state organizations planned coinciding conventions. The Confederate Veterans Association announced that it would convene at the Tabernacle and that 60,000 to 100,000 members would probably attend. Hence, a new balcony anchored on steel columns extending into the basement was constructed, making the Tabernacle the South's largest assembly hall. After the convention, the Confederate Veterans Association donated money to pay for the balcony, known since then as the Confederate Gallery.[26]

Many Nashvillians felt that since public funds had gone into the construction of the Tabernacle, the building should be used, when needed, for public events such as conventions, lectures, political speeches, recitals, and musical programs. At the same time, it was realized that a stage was needed to accommodate many of these activities. In 1901, a fund-raising committee, in cooperation with the Nashville Philharmonic Society, succeeded in bringing the Metropolitan Opera to Nashville—for which a stage was finally built. Although the stage was so big that it reduced the building's seating capacity to 3,500, it gave the city an auditorium which could accommodate opera companies, concert performers, and theater groups.

During the next few decades, the Ryman featured a host of renowned talent, including the Chicago and New York Symphony orchestras, John Philip Sousa's band, William Jennings Bryan, Booker T. Washington, Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan, Enrico Caruso, Billy Sunday, Bob Hope, Doris Day, and countless others.[27] However, the circumstance which elevated the Ryman Auditorium to national prominence was its service as the first permanent, long-term home of the *Grand Ole Opry*.

---

[25] Thomas B. Brumbaugh, Martha Strayhorn, and Gary G. Gore, eds., *Architecture of Middle Tennessee: The Historic American Buildings Survey* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1974), 40-42.
[26] Ibid., 42.
[27] Ibid., 44.

The *Opry* at Ryman Auditorium

In 1943, the *Opry* settled in the Ryman Auditorium, according to historians at the Country Music Foundation and present-day management of Opryland USA.[28] The move to the Ryman coincided with an event that helped establish country music in the consciousness of the American people. During the winter of 1938-39, a 30-minute portion of the *Grand Ole Opry* had been sold to the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company for broadcast over a regional network of NBC. On October 9, 1943, the broadcast, which plugged Prince Albert Smoking Tobacco, expanded from 63 to 129 stations in a coast-to-coast NBC hookup. Impressed by the success of Price Albert, the Ralston Purina Company contracted that same year to sponsor another 30 minutes through stations affiliated with NBC in the South and Southwest.

Four years later, in 1947, a WSM representative described the move of the *Opry* to the Ryman as such:

> "Far beyond our original plans for the program, the *Grand Ole Opry* has become a national institution. Let me briefly illustrate what I mean. We rent on an annual basis the largest auditorium in Middle Tennessee, in which we have installed complete studio facilities (control room, rehearsal rooms, public address system, floodlights, stage props, etc.). To handle the enormous crowds, we employ 37 firemen, policemen, ushers, ticket sellers, stage hands, and electricians. This number, added to the number of performers, gives us a total of 152 people in all. The talent costs alone on the *Grand Ole Opry* is [sic] $1500 per week."[29]

Not only had *Grand Ole Opry* become a national institution, the musical form it was promoting in its shows—country music—was achieving national prominence, thanks in no small part to the Saturday night broadcasts from the Ryman. Minnie Pearl saw a direct correlation between the move to the Ryman and the "beginning of the explosion of country music." "I was aware that things had changed when we moved into the Ryman," she said, and added that, in her mind, there were two reasons why the show had gone from a popular show to a national sensation. First since the move occurred during wartime, more and more soldiers made up the audience in the Ryman, thereby giving the *Opry* a new meaning for thousands of homesick, sometimes frightened young men. Times were propitious for spreading country music, and that is just what the soldiers did with their guitars and memories of nights at the Ryman.[30]

Second, Ms. Pearl believed that the *Opry* was successful in attracting outstanding talent to add to its already glittering roster. Uncle Dave Macan, the *Opry*'s first big star, and Roy Acuff, the *Opry*'s newest and brightest star, both moved into the Ryman along with the show. Others on the wartime programs included Bill Monroe, Ernest Tubb, Pee Wee King, Eddy Arnold, and, of course, Minnie Pearl as the only woman in the show. Roy Acuff's mounting fame through personal appearances on the road and through his movie roles also fed the flames of the *Opry*'s renown.

---

[28] Eiland, *Nashville's Mother Church*, 50-51. The exact date of the move has been a source of uncertainty and controversy. Eiland notes that in newspaper accounts, in histories of Nashville and Tennessee, and other places, the date of the move is given as 1941. At the same time, the recollection of some of the Opry's performers, including Minnie Pearl, is that the move took place in 1942. The 1943 is derived in part, from an article in the June 5, 1943 issue of the *Tennessean*, and a program release found in Vanderbilt University library special collections which states that, "Now . . . *Grand Ole Opry* moves to Ryman Auditorium. Now there will be room for [spectators] and additional hundreds in Ryman Auditorium."

[29] Ibid., 54.

[30] Ibid., 54-55.

Clearly, the heightened popularity of the *Opry* at the Ryman was due to its growing list of entertainers. In 1945, the Bailes Brothers, Bradley Kincaid, Lew Childre, and Cowboy Copas joined the show. Bill Monroe put together a group of musicians that has been described as the best five-piece band ever—the Bluegrass Boys. Comprised of Monroe on mandolin and tenor harmony, Earl Scruggs on banjo, Lester Flat on guitar and lead vocal, Chubby Wise on fiddle, and Howard Watts ("Cedri Rainwater") on bass, the band became a standard by which others have been measured. Fittingly, one of the last big festivals held at the Ryman before the *Opry* moved out was a bluegrass "revival" in 1973 headlined by Bill Monroe.[31]

It is worth noting that the *Opry* was significant not only for the big names it drew, but also for its role in advancing the careers of many lesser-known country singers and musicians. As late as 1961, fewer than 10 percent of radio stations were country in format. Between 1928 and 1933 the *Opry* was the only vehicle by which aspiring country performers could reach a national audience, and it remained the premier such venue thereafter. Performing on the *Grand Ole Opry* boosted demand for record sales and personal appearances for those who joined the show. Many singers and musicians were unable to continue performing on the *Opry* after they achieved a measure of success because they could not afford to interrupt their performance schedules to appear on the show.[32]

Country music sales continued to climb in the post-war years. On Saturday night the *Grand Ole Opry* was attracting between five and eight million people.[33] Commenting on the status of the *Grand Ole Opry* during the post-war era, country music historian Bill Malone notes that during the 1940s, there was no question that the *Grand Ole Opry* had become "king" of the barn-dance radio shows and that Nashville had become the leading country music center. The *Opry*, with its wide radio coverage on WSM augmented by the 30-minute NBC segment, had become universally known as "hillbilly heaven."

According to Malone, by the late 1940s, many country fans from all over the United States, Canada, and other countries, had come to look upon the *Grand Ole Opry* as synonymous with country music. However, as the *Opry* grew in size and popularity, it lost both its original geographical identity (that of a Middle Tennessee barn dance) and much of its down-home ambience. Hay's dream of an uncommercialized "folk" format had long before been obliterated under an avalanche of commercial advertising and the rise of big-name stars.[34]

In 1949, the individual who would become one of the biggest stars in the history of country music made his debut on the Ryman's stage. On the night of June 11, a tall, lanky farm boy walked out to the microphone and belted out his "Lovesick Blues." Hank Williams stopped the show! The calls for encores were so numerous that before the audience could be calmed, it had to be assured that Williams would again appear on the *Opry*. The early 1950s saw other bright additions to the *Opry*'s growing constellation of stars. The Carter family joined the *Opry* in 1951, and Chet Atkins was their guitarist. Kitty Wells also took to the Ryman's stage in those years, thus paving the way for other women to join the *Opry*. Marty Robbins, Jean Shepard, and Justin Tubb also joined the *Opry* roster in the 1950s. Of special note in 1954 was the single appearance of a non-*Opry* member, Elvis Presley. Surprisingly, Elvis did not click with the audience which was there for dyed-in-the-wool country music.[35]

---

[31] Ibid., 57.
[32] Letter from Herbert L. Harper, Tennessee Historical Commission, October 18, 2000.
[33] Tony Scherman, "Country," *American Heritage* (November 1994): 52.
[34] Malone, *Country Music*, 205.
[35] Eiland, *Nashville's Mother Church*, 62.

Despite the dislike for Elvis, "rockabilly" music (the melding of country and rock via the introduction of electrified and percussion instruments) had entered the scene in the 1950s, and it was there to stay. In addition to "rockabilly," the Ryman saw the introduction of television in 1954 with a network program, sponsored by Ralston Purina, which aired the fourth week of every month. The ABC show *Stars of the Grand Ole Opry*, was filmed an hour or so before the *Opry*, which began at 7:30 P.M. In that way, the producers used the *Opry* crowd as an audience for the filming. Ironically, Purina, which was attempting to pitch animal feed, canceled the show when it learned, through a poll, that the bulk of the show's fans were urban and suburban viewers.[36]

Regardless of the cancellation, television cameras became a routine fixture in the Ryman during the next twenty years. Arlene Francis, Dinah Shore, Barbara Mandrell, and Dolly Parton all shot segments of their shows at the Ryman, and Jimmy Dean and Porter Wagoner used the auditorium for their weekly variety shows. One of the most popular shows filmed at the Ryman was ABC's, *The Johnny Cash Show*, which premiered June 7, 1969. Cash insisted that the show be filmed at the Ryman because of the warm welcome he had received there in the 1950s. He told a Nashville reporter that he did not want a Hollywood studio or a Hollywood audience for his variety show; he wanted the real thing and he knew that he would find it only in Nashville at the *Opry* House.

The 1960s were also important years in the history of the Ryman and the *Opry*. In 1961, the Ryman celebrated its 70th birthday with a gala performance by the American Ballet Theater. At the same time, some of the *Opry*'s stars invaded Carnegie Hall for a rousing, sold-out performance. Despite their success, Dorothy Kilgallen, a popular New York columnist, raised the ire of many an *Opry*-lover when she referred to the visitors as "hicks from the sticks."[37] In 1964, the *Opry* itself listed 55 star acts and a total cast of more than 100 performers. New ones appeared annually, including Dottie West, Willie Nelson, and the Osborne Brothers. Likewise, the *Opry* lost some of its headliners during the mid-1960s, including Ray Price, Don Gibson, Justin Tubb, and, for a few years, Johnny Cash, who was dropped because of a debilitating drug habit.

In 1968, NBC's telecast of the *Second Annual Country Music Association Awards* required many temporary changes at the Ryman. A new stage laid down over the old one projected eight or nine rows into the space vacated by the pews. The producers redecorated the stage to mask its more rustic aspects and hung white, starry lights throughout the area. The awards show was a success and became an annual event at the Ryman until the *Opry* moved out in 1974.

The early 1970s saw the addition of more *Opry* performers, including Tom T. Hall, Barbara Mandrell, and Jeanne Pruett, who could claim that she was the last singing artist to join the *Opry* while it was still at the Ryman. Aside from its regular *Opry* broadcasts from the Ryman, WSM hosted other events from the auditorium: the annual *Opry* Birthday Celebration and country Disc Jockey's Convention, the Fan Fair, and *Grand Ole Gospel Time* (a Sunday afternoon show created to recognize the links between country and gospel). There was also a gospel show which followed the Friday night *Opry* at the Ryman. In addition, the auditorium was the scene of beauty contests, talent shows, and marriages.

In 1973 the *Grand Ole Opry* moved to a new larger facility at Opryland, an amusement-entertainment park along the Cumberland River. Ryman Auditorium remained dark, for the most part, until 1994. In the interim, the building's owners planned to raze the Ryman and, as a sentimental gesture, use part of the materials salvaged from it to build a church at Opryland. However, under new ownership, the Ryman was rehabilitated in 1992. A rear, two-story addition was constructed in anticipation of its new role as an events venue. Today, the

[36] Ibid., 63.
[37] Ibid., 69.

auditorium continues to serve in this capacity, hosting performances ranging in talent from Emmylou Harris to Bob Dylan. The *Opry* regularly returns to the Ryman for several winter performances, when the show's smaller audience can be accommodated in the Ryman.[38] In addition, the Ryman features museum exhibits which focus on the auditorium's history, particularly on its role as the first permanent, long-term home of the *Grand Ole Opry*.

[38] Letter from Herbert L. Harper, Tennessee Historical Commission, October 18, 2000.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Beasley, Ellen. "The End of the Rainbow." *Historic Preservation* 24, no. 1 (1972): 18-23.

Bedwell, Randall, ed. *Unbroken Circle: A Quotable History of the Grand Ole Opry*. Nashville: Cumberland House, ca. 1999.

Brumbaugh, Thomas B., Martha Strayhorn, and Gary G. Gore, eds. *Architecture of Middle Tennessee: The Historic American Buildings Survey*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1974.

Chewning, J. A., and Jack E. Boucher, photog. *Union Gospel Tabernacle (Ryman Auditorium, Grand Ole Opry House)*. Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, 1979.

Cusic, Don. "Qwerty, Nashville, and Country Music." *Popular Music and Society* 18, no. 4 (1994): 41-55.

Eiland, William U. *Nashville's Mother Church: The History of the Ryman Auditorium*. Nashville: Opryland USA, 1992.

Fox, William Price. "*Grand Ole Opry*." *American Heritage* 30, no. 2 (1979): 94-103.

Gates, David. "Nashville's Shrines: Memories, Stars, and Famous Guitars." *Smithsonian* 18, no. 12 (1988): 84-99.

Greenway, John. "Country-Western: The Music of America." *American West* 5, no. 6 (1968): 32-41.

Henderson, Jerry. "A History of the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee: 1892-1920." PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1962.

Henderson, Jerry. "Nashville's Ryman Auditorium." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1968): 305-328.

Howell, William W. "Hugh Cathcart Thompson: Native Tennessee Architect." PhD diss., University of Tennessee.

Kingsbury, Paul. *The Grand Ole Opry History of Country Music: 70 Years of the Songs, the Stars, and the Stories*. New York: Villard Books, ca. 1995.

Krishef, Robert K. *The Grand Ole Opry*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, ca. 1978.

Longino, Miriam. "The Ryman Auditorium: Echoes from Country Music's Mother Church." *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (12 June 1994): M6.

Malone, Bill C. *Country Music, U.S.A*, rev. ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.

McDaniel, William R., and Harold Seligman. *Grand Ole Opry*. New York: Greenberg, 1952.

Minnix, Kathleen. "That Memorable Meeting: Sam Jones and the Nashville Revival of 1885." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1989): 151-161.

Rada, Joe. "Return of the Ryman." *Southern Living* 30, no. 3 (1995): 54.

Scherman, Tony. "Country." *American Heritage* 45, no. 7 (1994): 38.57.

Stamper, Powell. *The National Life Story: A History of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968.

Stockdell, Richard P. "The Evolution of the Country Radio Format." *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 4 (1983): 144-151.

Strobel, Jerry, ed. *Grand Ole Opry – WSM History-Picture Book.* Nashville: WSM Broadcasting Company, 1975.

Tassin, Myron, and Jerry Henderson. *Fifty Years at the Grand Ole Opry*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1975.

"The *Opry*'s First Real Home." *Southern Living* 24, no. 5 (1989): 24.

Walker, Tom. "Fix-Up to Give Famous Hall a Cooling-Off Period." *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (11 April 1994): M1.

Wolfe, Charles K. *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry*. Nashville: Country Music Foundation and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999.

————. *The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years.* London: Old Time Music, 1975.

————. Radio interview on "The Fine Print." Nashville Public Radio, June 26, 1999.

Wolfe, Charles K., and Bill C. Malone. *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

___ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
_X_ Previously Listed in the National Register.
___ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
___ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
_X_ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #_TN-23____
___ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #_____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State Agency
___ Federal Agency
___ Local Government
___ University
___ Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: approximately 2.6 acres

UTM References:		Zone	Northing	Easting
	A	16	4001600	519890

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary includes approximately 2.6 acres on the east side of Fifth Avenue North, a half block north of Broadway in downtown Nashville. The Ryman Auditorium is bounded by Opry Place on the southwest, 4th Avenue South on the northeast, Commerce Street on the northwest, and an alley on the southeast.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the parcel historically associated with Ryman Auditorium.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Dr. Frank J. J. Miele/Senior Historian
National Park Service
Address: National Register Programs Division, SERO
Atlanta Federal Center–1924 Building
100 Alabama St., SW–5th Floor
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Telephone: 404-562-3173

Date: 8/11/2000

Edited by: Patty Henry, Kira Badamo, and Shannon Davis
National Historic Landmarks Program
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW (2280)
Washington, DC 20240

Telephone: (202) 354-2216

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
January 3, 2001

Ryman Auditorium–Photograph Inventory

Contemporary Photographs (Frank Miele, 02/29/2000)

1.View of west and south elevations from Broadway, photographer facing north/northeast.
2. View of fenestration on west (main) elevation, photographer facing east.
3. Close-up of decorative tablet in center of second story on west (main) elevation, inscribed with original name of building, photographer facing east.
4. View of north (left) and west (main) elevations, photographer facing southeast.
5. View of east (rear) elevation of two-story addition, photographer facing west.
6. View of auditorium interior depicting church pews and "Confederate Gallery," photographer facing northeast.
7. View of upper level seating arrangement, photographer facing northwest.
8. View of stage from upper level, photographer facing south.

Historic Photos (from Tennessee State Archives)

9. View (ca. 1890s) of north (left) and west (main) elevations, photographer facing southeast.
10. View (ca. 1972) of east (rear) elevation which pre-dates ca. 1984 two-story addition.