NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 2012)

OMB No. 10024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name RCA Studio B

other names/site number RCA Victor Studio

2. Location

street & number 1611 Roy Acuff Place NA☐ not for publication

city or town Nashville NA☐ vicinity

state Tennessee code TN county Davidson code 037 zip code 37203

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

E. Patrick Mitchell, Jr. 5/25/2012

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☑ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet
☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

7/10/2012

RCA Studio B
Name of Property

Davidson County Tennessee
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE-professional
RECREATION AND CULTURE-music facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION-research facility
RECREATION AND CULTURE-music facility
RECREATION AND CULTURE-museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

No style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls CONCRETE
roof ASPHALT
other CONCRETE

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☒ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)
Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property

☒ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

PERFORMING ARTS
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance
1957-1977

Significant Dates
NA

Significant Person
(complete if Criterion B is marked)
Atkins, Chester Burton (Chet)

Cultural Affiliation
NA

Architect/Builder
Maddox, Dan

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A
☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ Previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:
☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State Agency
☐ Federal Agency
☐ Local Government
☐ University
☒ Other
Name of repository:
Country Music Hall of Fame and Musuem

RCA Studio B
Name of Property

Davidson County Tennessee
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1 acre Nashville West 308 NE

UTM References
(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	16	518638	4000613	3			
2				4			

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title See continuation sheet
organization _____ date _____
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state TN zip code _____

Additional Documentation

submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 0r 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO) or FPO for any additional items

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name See continuation sheet
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

FORM PREPARED BY:

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Tara Mitchell Mielnik, Ph.D., Metro Nashville Historical Commission, 3000 Granny White Pike, Nashville TN 37204

John Rumble, Ph.D., Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 222 5th Avenue South, Nashville TN 37203

OWNER NOTIFICATION

Mike Curb
Curb Records
48 Music Square East
Nashville TN 37203
Attn: Becky Judd

Mike Curb Family Foundation/Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum c/o_Jennifer Alexander
222 5th Avenue South
Nashville TN 37203
615-416-2005

Don Cusic
Belmont University – CEMB
1900 Belmont Boulevard
Nashville TN 37212

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

RCA Studio B, located at 1611 Roy Acuff Place in Nashville, Tennessee, is a one and two story concrete block building constructed in 1957, with ca. 1960 additions. The building is situated in an urban setting on the southeast corner of the intersection between Roy Acuff Place (formerly Hawkins Street) and Music Square West (17th Avenue South). The building's dimensions are eighty-four feet long (parallel to Roy Acuff Place) by forty-eight feet wide. There is a flat roof on both levels with asphalt and aggregate covering, and aluminum gutters and downspouts. Overall, the exterior envelope is in good condition.

Exterior

The building's exterior envelope is of concrete block construction with few fenestrations. The north façade is one story and windowless, composed of painted concrete masonry block with a section of decorative concrete block squares, each measuring eight inches by eight inches, some of which seem to have been in place by 1966, along the eastern section of the wall; the rest were evidently added when the windows were blocked in, apparently after 1973. (See Figure 1.) The area of decorative blocks measures approximately thirty-four feet long by nine and one-half feet high and includes the space of a former panel of windows according to historic photographs. The second-story studio portion of the building is visible from the north façade and from all elevations; it is of regular painted concrete block construction with a flat roof. A large red-and-white sign reading "RCA Victor Studio" is centrally located on the second-story façade.

At the far west end of this façade is the opening for the porch, which serves as the main entrance to the structure. The concrete porch is enclosed on three sides with an opening measuring sixty-four inches wide. Three steps, with a steel handrail, lead up from street level to the porch level. Consisting of a three-foot door with a sidelight of modern metal-and-glass construction, the door unit spans the width of the porch. The roof over the porch area is flat and slightly stepped down from the adjacent roof of the front addition. Near the porch opening are two bronze plaques. One reads:

RCA STUDIO B
Purchased and Restored by the
MIKE CURB FAMILY FOUNDATION
January 24, 2002
To Preserve the History of Nashville's Music

The other plaque reads:

RCA STUDIO B
Established November 1957
Donated to
The Country Music Foundation
By DAN and MARGARET MADDOX
May 20, 1993

The concrete block wall of the west elevation, fronting on Music Square West, is punctuated by two sections (each measuring three feet wide by six feet tall) of "screen blocks" and an area of decorative blocks. The rear (south) elevation of the building fronts the RCA Studio A building, which is situated on an adjacent lot. There are two openings in this elevation: the studio's rear entrance, a three feet wide door with five steps leading to it from ground level, and a door to a small second story space that houses the studio's original "echo chamber" and related equipment. This door is accessed by a steel ladder attached to the face of the building. (See figures 4 and 5.)

The east elevation of the studio building is punctuated by a modern three foot door panel with sidelight of metal and glass. This door enters the one-story, ca. 1960 addition space of the building and is covered by a small flat porch roof. This doorway serves as the main exit for sightseeing tours of the building, opening into the adjacent parking lot area.

Interior

Inside, the building consists of the original two-story studio area; its control room, a lounge area with restrooms; and the long, narrow, ca. 1960 addition, all essentially unchanged from their original configuration, with only minor interventions into their fabric.

Studio B proper is a large rectangular room measuring approximately forty-two and one-half feet long by twenty-seven feet wide and thirteen feet tall. The walls of the room (on three sides) are undulating, changing angles every four feet. This design was intended to capture sound waves and make the room sound as "dead" as possible. The walls are covered in one foot by one foot acoustical tiles from a height of three feet above the floor to the ceiling. From the three feet line down to the floor, the walls are covered in carpet. Historic photographs reveal a different treatment to the walls' undulations, including alternating burlap fabric and some sort of curtains. The exact date of these wall treatments is unknown, but the undulations seem to have been installed in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Along the south interior wall, beveled sections arranged in a "zig-zag" pattern were installed in the 1960s to improve the acoustics. On these sections are several metal brackets, each holding microphone booms (long metal poles with mounting pieces for microphones). During the studio's 1996 restoration, the burlap was replaced with acoustical tiles.

The floor is covered with linoleum tiles, approximately twelve inches by twelve inches, in a diagonal checkered pattern. Installed in 1996, this floor covers the original flooring of ten inch by ten inch linoleum-and-asbestos tiles, and a linoleum floor that was placed over the linoleum-and-asbestos floor in the 1960s, after the latter was stabilized and permanently sealed. The current linoleum flooring was manufactured by the same company that made the second floor, using tiles of the same era and similar colors. The room is lit by nine overhead light fixtures of four lights each, presumably original. (See Figure 3.)

The north wall of the studio is a "smooth" wall without undulations, and is punctuated by a set of double doors leading to the ca. 1960 addition space. Also along this wall is a large, double-paned exhibition window measuring nearly sixteen feet long by four feet high. This window looks into Studio B from the "Studio D" area of the addition space (see below) and was installed in 1996 to enhance sightseeing tours. Prior to the window's installation, this portion of the wall was unpunctuated. Studio B is separated from its

control room by a wall with two double-paned windows, one measuring approximately five feet wide by four feet tall, the other nine feet wide by four feet tall. The control room is accessed from the studio by two doors located on either end of the wall. All door and window trim in the studio is made of rough hewn "barn board." Various pieces of recording equipment and instruments that are important to Studio B's significance still remain in the room, though they are not attached to the building. The most notable instrument is the 1942 Steinway & Sons Model B grand piano used by session pianist Floyd Cramer on hits such as Elvis Presley's "It's Now or Never" and his own hit "Last Date." The vibraphone, a Deagan No. 1000 Vibra-Harp manufactured in the late 1950s, and the marimba, a Deagan No. 1200 model made in the early 1960s, were staples of RCA studios of this era. Also original to the studio are a Celeste (made by the Helmes Company) of unknown date and a Lyon & Healy upright piano with thumbtacks inserted into the hammers to heighten its percussive sound.

Along with several original amplifiers and two Altec A-7 speakers, RCA Studio B contains three wood-and-carpet platforms, or "benches," used to position guitar amplifiers off the floor; each platform has an input jack and a control dial. The studio also has five sets of baffles (two each) used to isolate particular instrumentalists, vocalists, and vocal groups.

The control room for RCA Studio B measures twelve feet deep and runs the width of the studio. This room is still fully functional, and a twenty-four-track mixing console installed in 2003, along with other recording equipment (including two original Teletronix LA-2A tube-type limiters used to control volume levels and thereby prevent distortion), still occupy this space. The walls are covered in twelve inch by twelve inch acoustical tiles from a height of fifty inches to the ceiling. From this point to the floor, the walls are covered in rough hewn "barn board." There is a small five inch step up into the area where the mixing console sits. Along the north wall, there is a ten foot-wide, four foot tall, double-paned exhibition window centered on the wall. Like the window in the north wall of the studio, this window was installed in 1996 for sightseeing tours of the building. On either side of the window hang two large wooden speakers, which were in use by March 1959 and presumed to be original. The ceiling height in the control room is eight feet, as the "echo chamber" is housed above it in the two-story space; however, there is no internal access to the chamber from here. The control room is accessed by the two doors in the east wall from the studio (both original) and by a third door in the west wall leading to the lounge area, also original.

The echo chamber, original to the studio, is approximately eleven feet, five inches by ten feet, eight inches, with nine feet ceilings. The highly reflective beveled walls are made of hard plaster, coated with yellowed shellac. The flooring is dense fiberboard. To achieve echo effects (also known as "reverb," for reverberation), a speaker and microphone were placed in this room. As recording sessions took place, sound from the speaker was picked up by the microphone and routed back into the studio's mixing board. The split-second delay created the desired effect. As part of a vintage recording method, this echo chamber is extremely rare today. (See figures 4 and 5.)

The lounge area consists of a workshop bench area, an open lounge, restrooms, a small office, several closets, and open storage space. There is evidence that the configuration of this space has changed over the years, as the walls and doors show traces of removed features. The floors in this area consist of plain linoleum tiles, and the exterior facing walls are painted concrete block. Interior walls are painted drywall. The rear (eastern) entrance to the building opens into this space and is referred to as the "musicians'

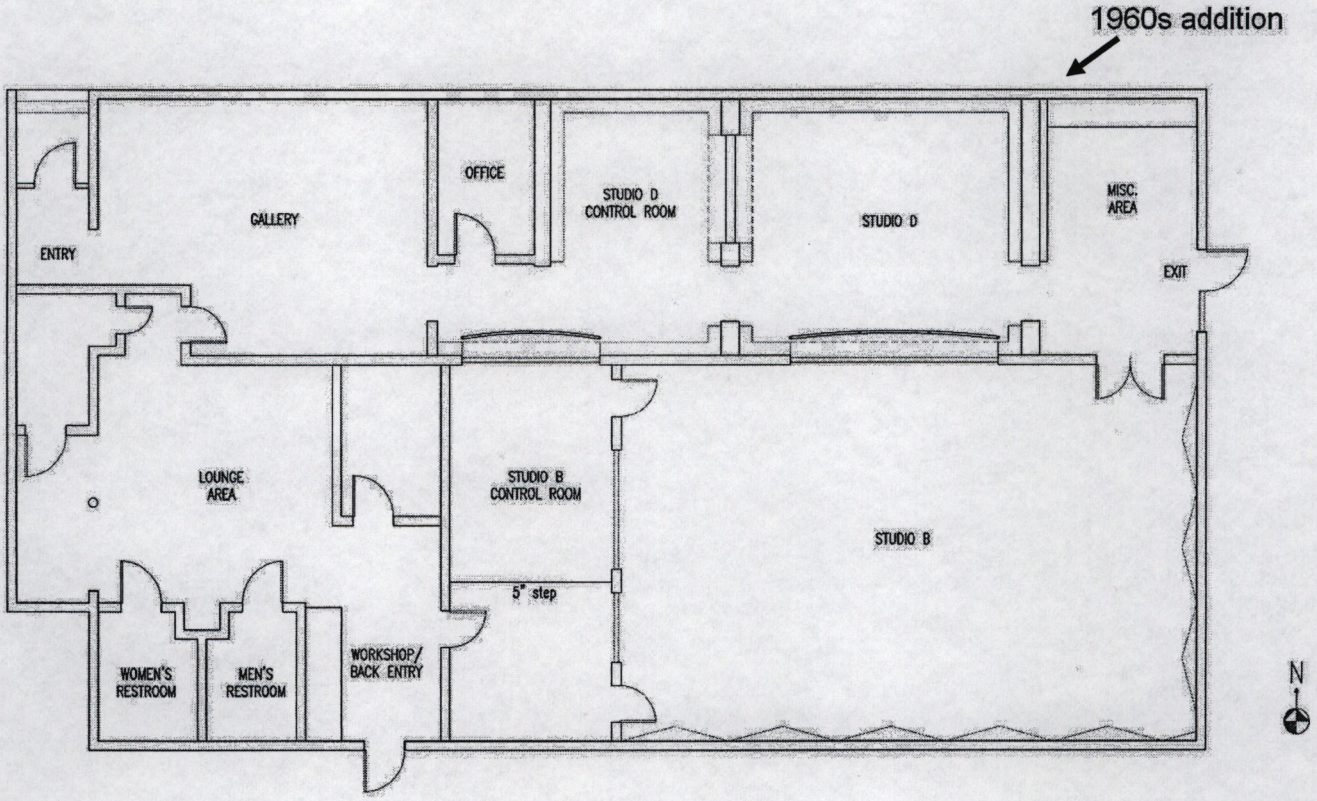
entrance." Other significant features of this area include the original "recording" sign near the control room door, which still operates to indicate that recording is in progress, as well as the new location of three echo devices, two of which were formerly housed in Studio D (see below) in the ca. 1960 addition. No longer in use, three German EMT echo devices (discussed below) are now stored in a small room in the northwest corner of the lounge area. This small room may have functioned at some point as a ticket booth for visitors to the studio.

The ca. 1960 addition space of the building is accessible from the lounge. The door from the lounge enters into what has been converted into a gallery space. The main entrance to the building also opens into this room, a large open space that is now used as a gathering point for the beginning of sightseeing tours. When the addition was first constructed this was believed to have been an entrance lobby or office space with a large bay of windows fronting the street. The windows were later blocked up (evidently after 1973, though possibly earlier) and the space now has smooth drywall or painted concrete walls. Poster-size images of famous musicians who have recorded at RCA Studio B hang on the walls, and track lighting is installed overhead in a suspended tile ceiling.

Also in the ca. 1960 addition are the remnants of Studio D and its control room. Studio D was added in the 1960s as a smaller studio adjacent the larger Studio B room, and was used primarily for mixing and mastering. Both rooms retain their original acoustical wall treatments, referred to as a "Rettinger" system (named after acoustical engineer Michael Rettinger). Both rooms now hold various historic pieces of equipment from RCA Studio B, including vintage microphones and the large, sixteen track mixing board custom-built by RCA in 1971 and used at the studio from 1971 into early 1977, when RCA closed all of its studios. The succession of these rooms with adjacent windows into Studio B and its control room presently serve as the primary route for the public tours of the building offered by the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RCA Studio B is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under criteria A and B for its local and national significance in the areas of performing arts and entertainment/recreation. Under criterion A, the building has local and national significance from 1957, when RCA moved its Nashville operations to this rented studio, until 1977, when continuous use of the studio ceased. Nationally, this was a major recording studio for Elvis Presley, and the premier recording and mixing studio for RCA country music artists including national and international stars such as Jim Reeves, the Browns, Dottie West, Eddy Arnold, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Dolly Parton. RCA pop acts (Elvis Presley, Al Hirt), successful artists on other labels (Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers), and numerous artists on various labels who did not gain national fame also recorded here. RCA Studio B was closely associated with the pop-influenced Nashville Sound. Promoted primarily by RCA executives Steve Sholes and Chet Atkins, and by Decca producer Owen Bradley, this sound changed the face of country music and helped broaden its popularity throughout the nation and around the world. Chet Atkins's association with RCA Studio B embraced the years 1957 to 1973, arguably the most productive years of his career as recording artist and producer. The studio building is nationally significant under criterion B as the best representation of Atkins's career.

RCA's new Nashville headquarters reflected the dramatic expansion of American music during World War II and the decades that followed, an expansion that outpaced the economy as a whole and witnessed the rise of other new music centers in Atlanta, Cincinnati, Memphis, Houston, and Detroit, among other cities. Studio B's debut also mirrored structural changes in the music industry, most notably the increasing dominance of sound recordings, which rapidly replaced radio's reliance on live performers and far outdistanced sales of sheet music and songbooks, once popular music's primary consumer products.[1] It is for these reasons that the period of significance extends to 1977 and the property meets criterion consideration G for exceptional significance of less than fifty years.

Overview

In 1957, RCA Records took a long-term lease on a new Nashville building at the corner of 17th Avenue South and Hawkins Street and installed a new recording studio there. This is the studio that we know today as RCA Studio B. The studio's opening in November of that year marked a milestone in the city's growth as a music center. Based in New York, the label already maintained recording studios in Chicago and Hollywood, but the new Nashville studio strengthened the company's presence in—and commitment to—the city's emerging music industry. Nashville's Bradley family had established a studio in 1955 on 16th Avenue South; RCA's new recording facility thus became the second major enterprise in the neighborhood later called Music Row. Together, Studio B and the Bradley Studio (bought by Columbia Records in early 1962) dominated Nashville recording for a decade and were the most important studios in developing the Nashville Sound.

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[1] Russell Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic: Publishing and Promoting America's Popular Music, 1900–1980* (Brooklyn, N.Y., Institute for Studies in American Music, 1983), 39–45, 53–62.

In the early 1960s, RCA expanded its Nashville operations. In 1960–61, the label enlarged the building containing Studio B. This addition housed mastering equipment, additional office space, and eventually, a second, smaller studio known as Studio D. In early 1965, RCA began renting a larger studio in a separate building next door.[2] At this point, the larger studio was named Studio A, and the original studio at 17th Avenue South and Hawkins, heretofore known simply as Nashville's RCA studio, was designated Studio B. (A small studio in the Studio A building later was named Studio C.)

Although RCA Nashville devoted most of its budget for new equipment to improve Studio A, Studio B's equipment was also upgraded. From an original two-channel mixing board, Studio B's capabilities were gradually improved to a sixteen-channel mixing console, which let producers and engineers put various instruments and voices on separate tracks on the master tape, and thus provided more options for mixing and balancing instruments and voices. Partly as a result, Studio B yielded hit records well into the 1970s.[3]

Between 1957 and 1977, RCA Studio B hosted approximately 35,000 recording sessions embracing locally based and visiting artists in many musical genres: country, bluegrass, country-pop, rockabilly, rock & roll, pop, jazz, and gospel. Here, top-flight recording artists, studio musicians and background singers, producers, arrangers, and engineers created more than a thousand hits. Performers included RCA acts such as Don Gibson, the Browns, Elvis Presley, Al Hirt, Dolly Parton, and Waylon Jennings, as well as artists on other labels, such as Roy Orbison (Monument), the Everly Brothers (Cadence, Warner Bros.), and Connie Francis (MGM). The informal yet highly efficient methods employed by Nashville music professionals, together with newly introduced echo techniques and other technical advances, gave recordings across the musical spectrum a seamless, ambient, "live" quality—a kind of studio magic that journalists dubbed "the Nashville Sound" as early as 1958.[4] This new sound generally replaced the fiddles, steel guitars, and rough-edged singing of traditional country with smoother, pop-influenced singers accompanied by orchestral stringed instruments and background vocals.

The Bradley / Columbia Studio (1955–82) and Bradley's Barn—established in nearby Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, in 1965—also hosted sessions leading to hundreds of hits, including Nashville Sound classics such as Sonny James's "Young Love," Ferlin Husky's "Gone," Patsy Cline's "I Fall to Pieces," and Marty Robbins's "Devil Woman." Leading producers who used the Bradley facilities included Columbia Records' Don Law, Capitol's Ken Nelson, and Owen Bradley, a primary figure in developing the Nashville Sound.

RCA Studio B, RCA Studio A, the Bradley / Columbia studio, Bradley's Barn, and the Woodland Studio (opened in East Nashville in 1967) hosted the lion's share of Nashville recording sessions into the late 1970s. In doing so, they gained worldwide reputations for recordings that became firmly embedded in American popular culture and thereby secured Nashville's international reputation as Music City, U.S.A.[5]

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[2] *Music Reporter*, June 12, 1961: 24; *Billboard*, April 3, 1965: 27.

[3] Interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992; interview with Harold Bradley, April 12, 2011; interview with Jerry Bradley, March 10, 2007. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews cited herein were conducted by CMF Senior Historian John W. Rumble. All interviews are housed in the Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum, hereinafter cited as Frist Library and Archive.

[4] *Music Reporter*, November 17, 1958, pages unnumbered..

[5] John Lomax III, "The Center of Music City: Nashville's Music Row," in Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385–89.

Steve Sholes and Chet Atkins

At RCA Records, two of the most important figures in the music industry were responsible for much of the success the label's Nashville operation achieved: New York-based Steve Sholes, and Chet Akins, head of the local office.

Stephen Henry "Steve" Sholes (1911–1968)[6]

Born in Washington, DC, Steve Sholes grew up near Camden, New Jersey, where his father worked for the RCA plant. Steve also worked for the plant, beginning as messenger boy in 1929, and later, part-time during his college years at Rutgers University. He also played clarinet and saxophone in dance bands, which led him to a position as sales clerk in RCA's record department, and then to a position as assistant producer for pop, country, and ethnic acts. In the latter capacity, he helped to supervise many sessions in New York, Chicago, and Atlanta in the late 1930s. During World War II, he served in the army's Victory Disc, or V-disc operations, making recordings for radio broadcasts and for soldiers' personal listening.

In 1945, Sholes became head of country and rhythm & blues recording for RCA Records. Based in New York, he signed country and jazz acts, most notably Chet Atkins, Eddy Arnold, Hank Snow, Jim Reeves, Jelly Roll Morton, and Dizzy Gillespie, often traveling to Nashville to record local artists. It was Sholes who convinced RCA to lease a new Nashville studio in 1957. Sholes had hired Atkins as his Nashville assistant in 1952, and both played major roles in developing Nashville as a recording center for country music, pop, rhythm & blues, and gospel. Sholes's proven instincts for identifying talent, particularly his signing Elvis Presley to RCA in 1955, led to his ascent at RCA. He was named both pop singles manager and pop singles and albums manager by 1958, and he became West Coast manager in 1961, requiring him to relocate to Los Angeles. In 1963, Sholes became RCA Records' vice president for pop production and returned to New York. During the 1960s, he served on the boards of directors of both the Country Music Association and the Country Music Foundation, and was instrumental in the founding of the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum. Sholes was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1967; he died of a heart attack in Nashville in 1968.

Chester Burton "Chet" Atkins (1924–2001)[7]

Born in Luttrell, Tennessee, to a musical family, Chester Atkins learned to play fiddle and guitar as a boy. After his parents divorced, he lived for a number of years with his father in Georgia, where he heard the unique style of famed guitar picker Merle Travis on the radio. As he sought to emulate Travis's style, Atkins developed his own variation. Following high school, Atkins landed a job in Knoxville, playing first fiddle and then guitar on radio station WNOX. This led to other radio jobs in Cincinnati, Raleigh, Chicago, and Springfield, Missouri, where a radio executive gave him the moniker "Chet." Steve Sholes signed him as a singer and guitarist in 1947, and Atkins returned to Knoxville shortly thereafter, working as a guitarist for

[6] John W. Rumble, "Steve Sholes," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 483.
[7] Rich Kienzle, "Chet Atkins," *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 20–21.

country acts including Homer & Jethro and Mother Maybelle Carter and the Carter Sisters. With the Carters, he moved back to Springfield briefly, then to Nashville in 1950 to join the Grand Ole Opry. Atkins quickly became a sought-after studio musician and appeared on the Opry as a solo act. He recorded his first chart single, "Mister Sandman," in 1955.

Far from being "just" a musician, Atkins was a talented producer and marketer. When the new sounds rock & roll and rockabilly music began cutting into the country market, Atkins was one of the first to respond by helping to develop a country style more appealing to widespread audiences. Together with Decca Records producer Owen Bradley, Atkins is largely credited with the development of the Nashville Sound. He produced many successful artists—among them Jim Reeves, Don Gibson, Skeeter Davis, Eddy Arnold, and Floyd Cramer—but as his workload increased, Atkins hired more staff producers at RCA, which allowed him to focus on his own recording and performance career. In addition to making national and international tours, he recorded numerous solo albums as well as albums with Hank Snow, Jerry Reed, Merle Travis, and Les Paul. Between 1957 and 1982, the year he left RCA and signed with the Columbia label, Atkins used Studio B for many of his recordings. From 1967 to 1988, he won the Country Music Association's Instrumentalist of the Year award eleven times; Atkins was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1973, and won a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997. He died of cancer in 2001.

America's New Music Industry

Between 1940 and 1960, the United States experienced profound changes in the relationships among songwriters, music publishers, radio stations, performance rights organizations, and record companies. Understanding the transformations that made the music industry larger, geographically broader, more diverse, and more democratic will help put RCA Studio B in its proper historical context.

The new performance rights licensing organization Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), launched in 1940, allowed songwriters and publishers outside the pop mainstream to receive compensation for the use of their songs in profit-making ventures. Previously, the older American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) dominated performance rights licensing. ASCAP collected annual fees from radio stations and other venues and distributed quarterly payments to an elitist, pop-focused membership, which required prospective songwriter members to have five published songs, all of which had to be hits. Payments were based on live, prime time network airplay, seniority, the size of a writer's or publisher's song catalog, and a given catalog's "prestige"—the last determined by ASCAP insiders.[8]

By contrast, BMI welcomed writers and publishers active in country, rhythm & blues, gospel, and Latin music as well as those in the pop mainstream. In determining royalty distributions, BMI gave no weight to seniority, size of catalog, or a catalog's prestige. Instead, the organization considered only current airplay on both network and non-network radio programs, monitoring airplay of recordings as well as live shows. BMI also financed new publishing ventures by giving advances of up to $250 per recorded song. Because many new publishing companies were affiliated with new, independent record labels, this seed money had a dual effect in fostering nascent enterprises. BMI was especially important to performers who wrote their own

[8] Ryan, *Production of Culture*, passim; Paul Kingsbury, *The Explosion of American Music, 1940–1990: BMI 50th Anniversary* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1990), 6–14.

material. By the 1950s, the organization was giving advances on future earnings to writers as well as to publishers, who often gave their own advances to songwriters.[9] BMI's innovations helped fuel an unprecedented commercial expansion and stylistic diversification in American popular music, especially in the burgeoning post–World War II economy. Country music's newfound popularity was particularly dramatic. In February 1943, *Billboard* predicted, "[W]hen the war is over and normalcy returns it will be the field to watch." The prediction proved accurate: The trade magazine estimated that country music accounted for 18 percent of the recording industry's total retail volume for 1955.[10]

By the late 1940s, wartime limits on record production had been lifted, freeing record companies to meet pent-up demand. Major labels RCA, Columbia, and Decca were joined by Capitol in 1942 and MGM in 1947, and smaller labels, called "independents," cropped up across the land. Independents were especially adept at launching the careers of new artists, whose contracts and master recordings were often bought by the majors. Elvis Presley, for example, burst onto America's musical landscape on Memphis-based Sun Record Company (NHL 7/31/03) in 1954. RCA country recording chief Steve Sholes signed him to the larger label in November 1955.[11]

By 1959, consumers were spending some $250 million a year on record players, which could be found in almost half of U.S. households.[12] Moreover, radio stations now relied on recordings instead of live performers. As advertisers shifted their spending to the newer medium of television, radio reduced its ranks of staff musicians. After the Federal Communications Commission removed wartime restrictions on new radio licenses, the number of stations rose from roughly 700 at war's end to some 3,300 in 1957. Many of these were fledgling operations that couldn't afford expensive talent rosters, and recordings provided an inexpensive solution.[13]

RCA Strengthens Its Nashville Presence

Since 1950, Sholes had been visiting Nashville from his New York office on periodic trips to record artists such as Hank Snow, the Davis Sisters, and Hawkshaw Hawkins. Sholes also recorded Eddy Arnold, the label's best-selling established country act, in Nashville (where Arnold lived), as well as bringing him to New York and Chicago.

From the late 1940s, both major labels and independents eagerly tapped Nashville's growing pool of pop and country radio performers. Record producers relied on a handful of local recording enterprises, including the pioneering Castle Recording Laboratory, formed by three WSM radio engineers in 1946. Using a WSM studio, Castle engineers recorded "Near You," a best-selling 1947 pop hit for Nashville orchestra leader Francis Craig on local independent Bullet Records. In 1947 the Castle partners built their own studio

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[9] *Ryan, Production of Culture*, passim; Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic*, 30–45; Paul Kingsbury, *The Explosion of American Music, 1940–1990: BMI 50th Anniversary* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1990), 14–17.

[10] *Billboard*: February 27, 1943: 92; March 3, 1956: 53.

[11] Ronnie Pugh, notes to *Jim Reeves: "Gentleman Jim," 1955–1959*, pages unnumbered; Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston and other cities: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 237.

[12] Ronnie Pugh, notes to *Jim Reeves: "Gentleman Jim," 1955–1959*; Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis,* 237.

[13] *Sanjek, From Print to Plastic*, 39–44, 47–49; Kingsbury, *The Explosion of American Music*, 17–18.

in the nearby Tulane Hotel (since demolished). WSM music director Owen Bradley and his brother Harold opened a studio in Nashville's Hillsboro Village neighborhood by 1953.[14]

As part of the larger Radio Corporation of America, RCA Records was contractually bound to use union engineers who belonged to the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians. The Castle partners and the Bradleys were reluctant to let outsiders use their studio; moreover, RCA engineers wanted to use their own equipment, so they had to find local entrepreneurs willing to accommodate them. Radio producers Charles and Bill Brown were amenable, and Sholes held sessions at their downtown studio as early as 1950, later using Thomas Productions on 13th Avenue North. In January 1955, RCA set up shop on McGavock Street in a studio rented part-time from the Television, Radio, and Film Commission (TRAFCO) of the Methodist Church. [15]

Chet Atkins, who had performed regularly on WSM's Grand Ole Opry in 1946 and assisted Sholes on New York, Chicago, and Atlanta sessions since becoming an RCA artist in 1947, had returned to WSM in 1950 and soon became Sholes's right-hand man in Nashville. In 1952, Sholes made Atkins his official assistant and soon began paying him a weekly salary.[16]

From McGavock Street to Music Row

From January 1955 into October 1957, Sholes and Atkins produced numerous hits in RCA's McGavock Street studio. Eddy Arnold, the Browns, Don Gibson, Hank Locklin, Jim Reeves, and Hank Snow, each an RCA act, made Top Ten records there. Atkins himself recorded "Mister Sandman" (1955), his first chart-making disc.[17]

The RCA artist who had the greatest impact, however, was Elvis Presley. Blending country music with rhythm & blues, he led Sun Recording Studios' pack of rockabilly acts, which also included Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins. Presley found strong support among country disc jockeys and starred briefly on Shreveport's KWKH *Louisiana Hayride*, but as the nation's leading rock & roll hit maker, he helped depress country sales in the mid-1950s. Combined with the spread of television—which kept many Americans at home during the evenings—rockabilly and the larger rock & roll movement it sparked lowered concert gate receipts for many country acts, especially those with more traditional sounds.[18]

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[14] Tandy Rice, interview with Steve Sholes, February 8, 1968; interview with Glenn Snoddy, August 9, 1983; Michael D. Freda, comp. *Eddy Arnold Discography, 1944–1996* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), passim; John W. Rumble, "The Emergence of Nashville as a Recording Center: Logbooks from the Castle Studio, 1952–1953," *Journal of Country Music* 7: 3 (December 1978), 22–41.

[15] Interview with Chet Atkins, September 8, 1992; interview with Glenn Snoddy, August 9, 1983; *Billboard*, January 22, 1955: 14.

[16] Chet Atkins, "Chet Atkins, Part I," *Guitar Player*, February 1972: 20–25, 39; Chet Atkins, "Chet Atkins, Part II," *Guitar Player*, March 1972: 3–33. The quotation comes from the former article, 25 and 39.

[17] RCA Recording Session Files, 1955–1957, Frist Library and Archive. All references to chart positions of recordings noted herein are taken from Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn's Top Country Songs, 1944–2005* (Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, Inc., 2005), and Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn's Top Pop Singles, 1955–2010* (Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, Inc. 2010). Both volumes are derived from *Billboard* magazine's weekly popularity charts.

[18] Colin Escott, "All Shook Up: The Rock Revolution and the Nashville Sound," in Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash, eds., *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), 214–22.

To meet the challenge, country recording executives pursued three complementary strategies. Seeking to retain country's longstanding, musically conservative audience, producers re-tooled the styles of mainstream country artists by recording them in better studios with innovative session musicians and engineers. A second approach was the Nashville Sound, a fresh twist on the well-established practice of courting a larger adult audience with pop-tinged country singers. By 1956, country producers were downplaying fiddles and steel guitars and adding piano, vocal groups, and orchestral string arrangements to create more broadly accessible sounds. On February 27, 1957, backed by piano, Atkins on electric guitar, and the Jordanaires vocal quartet, RCA's velvet-voiced Jim Reeves recorded "Four Walls," one of the earliest examples of the country-pop approach embodied in the Nashville Sound. A #1 country hit, "Four Walls" also rose to #11 on the pop charts and led to Reeves's pop radio show, fed to the ABC network from WSM during 1957–58.[19] The record set the pattern for his later hits, most of which he cut at RCA Studio B.

A third strategy was to sign rockabilly acts—and thereby gain market share among teenagers, who were snapping up records right and left. Shortly before opening RCA's McGavock Street studio, Sholes had paid $35,000—then an astounding sum—for Presley's Sun contract. Many in the industry considered the move foolish, but Presley proved them wrong by selling millions of records over the next three years—and beyond. His first RCA session, held in Nashville on January 10, 1956, yielded "Heartbreak Hotel," which zoomed to #1 country and #1 pop. Six more chart-topping Presley discs followed during 1956–57.[20] Presley would go on to record more than 230 sides in RCA Studio B.

RCA Studio B Opens Its Doors

Despite their success, neither Sholes nor Atkins liked the McGavock Street studio. "It had a curved ceiling," Atkins explained in 1992. "When you'd play a bass note, it would amplify it, and it would come back at you and get in all the other mikes."[21] Additionally, scheduling sessions around Methodist Church projects was sometimes problematic. The success the two producers had already enjoyed—especially the profits Presley generated—helped Sholes persuade top RCA officials to invest in a new local studio.

In 1957, the label took a long-term lease on a building constructed by Nashville entrepreneur Dan Maddox at the corner of 17th Avenue South and Hawkins Street (now Roy Acuff Place). Work began by the summer of that year, and in late October, RCA engineer Les Chase came down from New York to work with local RCA staff member Selby Coffeen in setting up tape machines, a mixing board, and other equipment. By November 4, *Music Reporter* noted, RCA's new Nashville studio was "already booking a heavy schedule of recording dates." Joining the Bradley Film and Recording Studio, established on 16th Avenue South in 1955, the RCA studio created a beachhead for the music industry in a neighborhood that soon attracted other music enterprises and eventually acquired the moniker Music Row.[22]

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[19] Interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992; *Billboard*, September 9, 1957: 22; Pugh, *Jim Reeves*, pages unnumbered.
[20] Escott, "All Shook Up," 220–22.
[21] Interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992.
[22] *Music Reporter*: August 17, 1957: 1; October 28, 1957: 2; November 4, 1957: 2; John Lomax III, "The Center of Music City," 386–87.

Chet Atkins Finds His Way

As Presley's sales climbed skyward and other acts Sholes produced gained hits, Sholes moved up RCA Records' corporate ladder to become vice president for pop production in 1963. Meanwhile, he had installed Chet Atkins as head of RCA's Nashville operation by the time RCA Studio B was completed.[23]

Although he had years of experience assisting Sholes and producing sessions on his own, the promotion put Atkins in the spotlight as never before, and it took him time to feel secure in his new position.[24] The first big hit he produced at RCA Studio B was Don Gibson's "Oh Lonesome Me," recorded December 3, 1957. Atkins had already recorded Gibson at the TRAFCO Building without steel guitar, adding drums and the Jordanaires quartet. For the December 3 session he made additional changes: "I just wanted to make 'Oh Lonesome Me' kind of like Don's demo," he recalled. "[So] we miked the bass drum. Up until that time, people just picked up the drums with one mike." Atkins had rhythm guitarist Velma Williams—one of Nashville's earliest female session musicians—play "a special beat," while he supplied a rock-like electric lead guitar solo. "Oh Lonesome Me" cracked *Billboard*'s country charts in February 1958 and went to #1, while climbing the pop charts to #7. Gibson's "I Can't Stop Lovin' You," also recorded on December 3, 1957, topped out at #7 country and #81 pop in early 1958. The two hits dramatically boosted Atkins's confidence and gave the studio instant national recognition.[25] Additional 1958 hits, including Johnnie & Jack's "Stop the World (And Let Me Off)," Hank Locklin's "Send Me the Pillow You Dream On," and Jim Reeves's "Blue Boy" further heightened Studio B's profile.

A Very Good Year

Although 1959 got off to a rocky start, it proved to be highly successful for Chet Atkins, RCA, and the label's Nashville studio. Underneath Atkins's calm exterior he was a sensitive artist, and he sometimes lost his temper under the pressures of finding songs, producing a large artist roster, and making his own records. Early in the year, he lashed out at engineer Bob Ferris, who often irritated his colleagues. Atkins took a swing at Ferris and missed, hitting a piece of equipment instead. No one remembers exactly what set Atkins off, but the incident led the engineers' union to close the studio while Ferris trained a replacement. The studio soon re-opened, though, with local TV cameraman Bill Porter as chief engineer. Porter quickly became one of RCA Nashville's greatest assets. Just as Atkins taught Porter to monitor recordings at a lower volume level—which let both men hear various frequencies more accurately—the producer readily absorbed Porter's knowledge of microphone types and placement, mixing consoles, and echo effects.[26]

An early milestone in the Atkins-Porter relationship was "The Three Bells," recorded by Grand Ole Opry artists Jim Ed Brown and his sisters Maxine and Bonnie in June 1959, some three months after Porter arrived at Studio B. As recorded by French chanteuse Edith Piaf, the song was far too long for a three-minute

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[23] *Music Reporter*: August 31, 1957: 1; November 25, 1957: 1, May 19, 1958, p. 1; *Billboard*: March 27, 1961: 4; May 4, 1968: 1, 70.

[24] Chet Atkins, with Bill Neely, *Country Gentleman* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1974), 187.

[25] Dale Vinicur, notes to *Don Gibson*: *The Songwriter, 1949–1960* (Bear Family, 2001), 11.

[26] Interview with Bill Porter, February 23, 1994; interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992; *Billboard,* December 19, 1960: 168.

single, so Anita Kerr, Atkins's principal arranger, made judicious edits. Complementing the Browns' smooth three-part harmony, she led her Anita Kerr Singers on background vocals resembling the church bells in the song's lyrics. A Nashville Sound classic, the hit topped both country and pop charts, put the Browns into network television, and led to additional crossover hits for the act.

Recorded October 15, 1959, Jim Reeves's million-selling "He'll Have to Go" was another crossover smash crafted at RCA Studio B. Distilling the essence of the Nashville Sound, it framed the star's rich baritone with a sparse background featuring piano and vibes; Kerr's vocal quartet artfully took the place of strings. The hit spent thirty-four weeks on the country charts during 1959–1960, fourteen of them at #1; during its twenty-three weeks on the pop charts, it rose to #2.[27]

A New Decade Begins

RCA Nashville roared into the 1960s with still more hits. "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" showcased Hank Locklin's yearning tenor vocal style. Co-writer Don Robertson sang on the demo he sent to Atkins, accompanying himself on piano with a "slipnote" technique featuring grace notes similar to steel guitar slides. Session pianist Floyd Cramer followed Robertson's example and helped push Locklin's recording to #1 country and #8 pop, deeply implanting the slipnote style in country music. Atkins advised Cramer to write his own slipnote song, and Cramer's 1960 crossover hit "Last Date" established his signature sound as both artist and studio musician.[28]

From the mid-1950s, Atkins had worked with Skeeter Davis to create her own harmony by combining new vocal parts with her original master tapes to create second-generation masters. In 1960, she added a harmony line to her recording of "Am I That Easy to Forget," and later told Atkins she had dreamed about a third part. Though he had already sent the second-generation master to New York, he was able to call it back; Davis added the third part to a third-generation master that resulted in a #11 country hit.[29]

Steve Sholes had high praise for the man he'd put in charge of RCA Studio B. "In terms of long range and multiple-artists benefits for the label," *Billboard* relayed on September 12, 1960, "Sholes regards Atkins as his most important coup. As one of the label's hottest artists and as head of the Nashville operation, [he] has been producing better than 50 percent of the label's singles hits." In October, the magazine named Atkins its Country and Western Man of the Year.[30]

Studio Musicians and Engineers

Atkins, however, was quick to credit Nashville's studio professionals for his good fortune. "Everybody is always talking about the 'Nashville Sound,'" he said in 1967. "Strictly speaking, there's no

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[27] Pugh, notes to *Jim Reeves*, pages unnumbered.
[28] Kevin Coffey, notes to *Hank Locklin: Send Me the Pillow that You Dream On* (Bear Family, 1996), 21–22; interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992.
[29] Skeeter Davis, *Bus Fare to Kentucky*: *The Autobiography of Skeeter Davis* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993), 162–63, 197–98.
[30] *Billboard*: September 12, 1960: 3; October 31, 1960: 23.

such thing. It's the musicians," whose creativity and improvisational skills supported a wide range of vocal stylists.[31]

In choosing material, Bill Porter emphasized, Atkins "didn't want to hear a finished demo," which might pre-dispose him to recreate its arrangement. After selecting songs in consultation with the artist, Atkins lined up session personnel. "Chet picked what he felt was the cream of the crop for what he was doing," said engineer Tommy Strong. "Then the musicians would devise who did what. He'd give all of them the opportunity to contribute. Most of the time, the musicians worked out 'head' arrangements. Except for strings or horns, nothing was really pre-arranged." [32]

Casual observers sometimes thought Atkins was ignoring the entire affair. Actually, he knew his own accomplishments might be intimidating and deliberately strove to create a laid-back studio atmosphere. "He'd be playing his guitar or reading," guitarist Ray Edenton recalled. "But he was aware of everything that went on. He'd hear something and come on the talk-back and tell you to slow it down, speed it up, try a different instrument on a certain part. . . . You couldn't put anything by him, musically."[33]

Atkins gave special kudos to Bill Porter, RCA Studio B's chief engineer from 1959 through 1963. "He had great ears and he was a great technical man," Atkins said later. "He's the best engineer I ever had."[34] To be sure, Porter achieved remarkable results with what today would be considered limited technology. In the days before stereo FM radio came into vogue, he typically mixed tapes down to a single output channel routed to a monaural tape machine. These tapes were used to create 45-rpm singles for AM radio broadcasting and retail sales. For albums, he sometimes mixed to a two-track master that let him approximate stereo sounds. By splitting the output signal to a right track and a left track, Porter explained, the human ear would put the vocal in the center of a simulated stereophonic mix.[35]

In either case, Porter was a master at balancing instruments and background voices and putting them in proper relationship to the lead vocal. His goal was to create an ambient sound that replicated what a listener would hear sitting some eight rows from the stage at a concert. While making music publishers' demos, he and Strong experimented with microphones to learn which ones sounded best with particular instruments, and to determine where each microphone and instrument should best be placed in the studio. Except for second- or third-generation masters, it was impossible to overdub after a session was over, nor was it possible to re-mix after the fact. Therefore, Porter and other engineers had to mix as recordings were made.[36]

Porter was especially adept at using echo to give record buyers the sensation of being in a large listening space. At first, he placed a speaker and a microphone in the echo chamber situated above the control room; this chamber had a highly reflective surface to make the sound from the speaker reverberate. He then used the microphone to route this sound back into the mixing board as recording took place, with a fraction-of-a-second delay creating the "echo" sensation. Porter arrived in March 1959, and within a few months the studio acquired a three-channel mixing console. Porter used the echo chamber for one channel, and a recently

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[31] Paul Wyatt, "His Name is Chet . . . And His Day Is Very Busy," *Tennessean Sunday Showcase*, May 21, 1967: 1–7.
[32] Interview with Bill Porter, February 23, 1994; interview with Tommy Strong, April 14, 2011.
[33] Interview with Ray Edenton, April 9, 2011.
[34] *Billboard*, December 19, 1960: 68; interview with Chet Atkins, September 18, 1992.
[35] Interview with Bill Porter, April 6, 1995.
[36] Interviews with Bill Porter: February 23, 1994; June 8, 1994.

acquired echo device made by the German EMT company for another channel, first placing this device in a room within the 1961 addition. Temporarily, he made another echo chamber in a small first-floor closet, using a speaker and microphone, until a second EMT device was procured. It was initially placed within the studio and covered with pillows, later moved to the same room with the first EMT, and eventually moved to a closet in the lounge area behind the control room. At some point, evidently after 1966, a third EMT device was installed in this same closet.

Each EMT device consisted of spring-mounted metal plates, into which the output signal was routed to make the plates vibrate. A portion of the resulting sound was then fed back into the mixing board. Porter tightened the springs on the EMTs to heighten their vibrations, and chilled them to make their metal plates ring more brightly.[37] Other studios in Nashville—and those in many cities—used echo as well, but Porter's mastery of echo techniques, along with his gifts for balancing and blending both instruments and vocals, drew many clients to RCA Studio B, including artists and producers from many other labels.

Flush Times in Music City

Following examples set by Decca in 1947 and RCA in 1955, other record labels were establishing Nashville offices by 1962. In that year, Capitol and ABC-Paramount created local branches. Also in 1962, Columbia bought the Bradley Film and Recording Studios and built its Nashville headquarters around the Bradleys' legendary Quonset Hut studio. Warner Bros., Imperial, Mercury-Phillips-Smash, and Sun were also active in Music City. Warner Bros. artist Bob Luman cut the massive 1960 crossover hit "Let's Think About Livin'" in RCA Studio B, while Dot Records, based in nearby Gallatin, Tennessee, recorded several performers there. Mercury, which had set up a Nashville office in 1961, signed Roger Miller after RCA New York ordered Atkins to release him in spite of his RCA hits "You Don't Want My Love" and "When Two Worlds Collide." Both were recorded at Studio B during 1960–61.[38]

Having launched Monument Records with Billy Grammer's 1959 crossover hit "Gotta Travel On"—cut at RCA Studio B late in 1958—Fred Foster soon moved his operation from Washington, DC, to Nashville. He found his greatest success with Texan Roy Orbison, whose lackluster sales on RCA led top-level corporate bosses to let him go. Before Foster bought the Sam Phillips Studio in downtown Nashville in 1964, Orbison made huge international pop hits at RCA Studio B, including "Only the Lonely," "Blue Angel," "Running Scared," "Crying," and "In Dreams," each of which sold hundreds of thousands of copies.[39] Under pressure from New York, Atkins also reluctantly dropped saxophonist Boots Randolph, whom he had brought to town as a session player. In 1963, Randolph landed a Top Forty pop hit with a Monument remake of "Yakety Sax," a song he'd earlier cut for RCA, and the number became his trademark. Both discs were cut at Studio B, as was "T for Texas," a #5 country chart maker for Monument's Grandpa Jones in 1962–63.[40]

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[37] Interviews with Bill Porter: June 8, 1994; April 6, 1995.
[38] *Music Reporter*: September 4, 1961: 6; January 22, 1962: 4; July 28, 1962: 23 October 20, 1962: 17; Daniel Cooper, notes to *King of the Road: The Genius of Roger Miller* (Mercury, 1995), 11; interview with Bill Porter, June 8, 1994; interview with Tommy Strong, December 20, 2011.
[39] Interviews with Fred Foster: November 15, 2000; November 29, 2000.
[40] Interview with Fred Foster, November 15, 2000.

In the meantime, the Everly Brothers, young men whose harmony won millions of teenaged fans in the pop and country markets, were recording best sellers for Archie Bleyer's New York–based Cadence label at RCA Studio B. In 1958 alone, the Everlys recorded "All I Have to Do Is Dream," "Bird Dog," and "Devoted to You"—crossover hits penned by famed husband-wife songwriting team Boudleaux and Felice Bryant. Switching to Warner Bros., the Everlys scored with "Cathy's Clown," and "Ebony Eyes," crossover smashes cut at RCA Studio B during 1960–61.[41] Sue Thompson recorded her 1961 pop hit "Norman" at the studio for Nashville's Hickory Records. Other labels using RCA Studio B included Challenge, Chart, Chess, Colonial, Deb, Old Town, Scarlette, 20th Century Fox, and United Artists.[42]

By 1957, RCA executive Ed Hines was on hand, lining up Studio B sessions for labels other than RCA. By 1960, Atkins was working closely with independent producer Jack Clement, and by 1961 Atkins hired Anita Kerr as RCA Nashville's musical director and arranger, whose duties included choosing songs and producing. Likewise, Atkins brought songwriter and RCA artist John D. Loudermilk on board to screen song material and produce certain artists. From a smaller staff revolving primarily around Atkins, Hines, engineers Bill Porter and Tommy Strong, and two secretaries, by June 1962 RCA's Nashville office had expanded to include engineer Bill Vandervort, radio and TV promoter Bob Holt, recorded program broadcasting liaison Jack Deal, and four secretaries. Engineer Jim Malloy would join in 1965. RCA's expanding local operation mirrored Nashville's growing recording activity. Sessions mushroomed from approximately 500 in 1957 to some 5,500 by 1968.[43] By this point, studios owned by Dot Records, Starday, and a number of other labels had opened, but RCA Studio B, RCA Studio A, the Columbia Records Studio, the Woodland Studio, and Bradley's Barn (built by the Bradley family in 1965 after selling their Music Row facility to Columbia in 1962) dominated local recording, and would continue to do so into the 1970s.

RCA Hit Makers of the 1960s

RCA's Nashville artists kept making hits in RCA Studio B as the decade progressed. Gravel-voiced Hank Snow reached #1 in 1962 with "I've Been Everywhere." Skeeter Davis's dual-market 1962 hit "The End of the World" highlighted her plaintive country vocals with piano arpeggios, strings, and her own multi-layered harmony.[44] Porter Wagoner, who had joined the Grand Ole Opry in 1957 and launched his own syndicated TV show in 1960, connected with 1962's "Misery Loves Company," 1965's "Green Green Grass of Home," and other straight-country fare. Atkins was typically on hand, but he essentially let Wagoner produce his own recordings, his duets with Dolly Parton, and Parton's solo recordings. Wagoner and Parton were decidedly rural, but Nashville Sound touches, including twin trumpets, broadened their appeal.[45]

Pop-leaning RCA country acts also delivered the goods. Dottie West won a 1964 Grammy with "Here Comes My Baby," and after a sales slump Eddy Arnold came back strong with "What's He Doing in My

[41] Interview with Bill Porter: February 23, 1994.
[42] *Music Reporter*, June 23, 1962, pages unnumbered.
[43] *Music Reporter.* August 3, 1957: 8: June 23, 1962, pages unnumbered; *U.S. News and World Report,* April 30, 1979.
[44] Davis, *Bus Fare to Kentucky,* 224.
[45] Interview with Tommy Strong, April 14, 2011; Steve Eng, *A Satisfied Mind: The Country Music Life of Porter Wagoner* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1992), 310–17 and passim; Wade Jessen, notes to *The Essential Porter Wagoner* (RCA, 1997), pages unnumbered.

World" (1963) and the massive 1965 crossover hit "Make the World Go Away." The latter was one of the first hits recorded in the new studio that Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley built next door to the smaller Hawkins Street studio and leased to RCA. Since this new facility was larger, RCA called it Studio A, while the older, smaller studio became Studio B.[46]

George Hamilton IV, having converted to country music after his breakthrough 1956 pop hit "A Rose and a Baby Ruth," asked Atkins to record him. The singer enjoyed two Top Ten hits in 1961–62, and his rendition of "Abilene" went #1 country and #15 pop in 1963.[47] Bobby Bare also sought Atkins's favor, and made his first RCA sides in RCA Studio B in 1962. In 1963 he had crossover hits with "Detroit City" and "500 Miles Away from Home."[48] Atkins signed hot guitarist Jerry Reed in 1964.[49]

Freelance producer Jack Clement oversaw the demos that brought Charley Pride to Atkins's attention in 1965. Top RCA executives were wary of signing the African-American singer, but Atkins prevailed. Over the next two decades, fifty-one Top Ten RCA hits, including twenty-nine #1s, made Pride one of the most successful artists ever to cut a country disc—in RCA Studio B or in any other studio. "When the history of country music is written," Atkins told veteran country broadcaster Ralph Emery, "that will be my greatest social contribution."[50]

So successful were RCA's Nashville artists that in 1968 the label made Atkins a company vice president.[51] He continued to hire additional staff or freelance producers to share the workload. Felton Jarvis joined in 1965 to produce Elvis Presley, among others. Staff producer Bob Ferguson supervised Connie Smith, who began her impressive chart run with the 1964 #1 hit "Once a Day." Soon Ferguson was also handling Wagoner and Parton (as solo artists and as a duo), Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, Jim Ed Brown, and Atkins himself. Davis also served as a staff producer from 1965 to 1970, operating independently thereafter. Others who followed included Ronnie Light, Roy Dea, and Ray Pennington. Jerry Bradley, who became executive director and Atkins's administrative assistant in 1970, produced many sessions as well.[52]

Pop, Jazz, Gospel, and Bluegrass at Studio B

In addition to recordings by country performers, RCA Studio B witnessed sessions by pop and jazz artists who availed themselves of RCA's Nashville engineers and the city's growing cadre of session musicians. Rosemary Clooney recorded her biggest hits for Columbia, but she also made several sides for RCA at Studio B in 1961. Actress and pop singer Ann-Margret, then signed to RCA, cut her most successful chart record, "I Just Don't Understand," in that same year. Also in 1961, African-American pop singer Robert Knight recorded "Because" for Dot. Jazz trumpeter Al Hirt, an RCA act, came to Nashville to make his critically acclaimed 1963 album *Honey in the Horn*. "Java," a single from this collection, went #4 pop in

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[46] Wade Jessen, notes to *The Essential Dottie West* (RCA, 1996), pages unnumbered.
[47] Dale Vinicur, notes to *George Hamilton IV, To You and Yours, From Me and Mine* (Bear Family, 1995), 55, 66–69; interview with George Hamilton, May 3, 2011.
[48] Interview with Bobby Bare, April 20, 2011.
[49] Colin Escott, notes to *The Essential Jerry Reed* (RCA, 1995), pages unnumbered.
[50] Ralph Emery, with Tom Carter, *More Memories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), 188.
[51] *Billboard*, March 23, 1968: 65.
[52] *Billboard*: October 2, 1965: 10; October 19, 1974: 20; December 16, 1972:40.

1964. African-American jazz vocalists Andy Bey and his sisters Geraldine and Salome likewise recorded at Studio B.[53]

Though Elvis Presley had started as a rockabilly performer blending country with rhythm & blues, he rapidly proved his mastery of pop and gospel as well. From 1958 into 1960, military service interrupted his career, but when his stint was over, RCA Studio B's reputation—particularly Bill Porter's proven abilities—led Steve Sholes to bring RCA's top-selling performer back to Nashville for his first post-army sessions.[54] Between 1958 and his death in 1977, Presley made more than 230 recordings at Studio B, including hits such as "I Got Stung" (1958), "It's Now or Never" (1960), and "Are You Lonesome Tonight" (1960). The talented singer embraced a wide range of material, from the rockabilly-influenced "Little Sister" (1961) and the country-tinged "Guitar Man" (1967) to the pop-shaded "Surrender" (1960).[55]

Additionally, Presley made many gospel classics at the studio, "Crying in the Chapel," "Bosom of Abraham," and "Reach Out to Jesus" among them. He also used RCA Studio B to record all or portions of several movie soundtracks, including *Follow That Dream* (1962), *Harum Scarum* (1965), and *Clambake* (1967). When Presley began his long engagement at the International Hotel in Las Vegas in 1969, he called upon Bill Porter—then running a studio there—to be his mixing engineer at the hotel and on road shows.[56]

Gospel acts had been recording at RCA's Nashville studios well before Presley cut "Crying in the Chapel" in 1960. The Blackwood Brothers, whose Memphis performances had inspired Elvis Presley during his teens, recorded at the label's McGavock Street studio as early as June 1957. Both the Blackwoods and the Statesmen frequented RCA Studio B well into the 1960s, as did the Florida Boys, the Speer Family, the Oak Ridge Boys, the Imperials, the Rambos, and the Cathedrals—all among gospel music's most recognized groups.[57]

RCA lagged behind other labels in signing name bluegrass bands, perhaps because the bluegrass market was relatively small. Nevertheless, the Stanley Brothers brought bluegrass to RCA Studio B in a Mercury session held on November 15, 1957. West Coast country star Rose Maddox made her historic Capitol album *Rose Maddox Sings Bluegrass* there in 1962, under the direction of bluegrass progenitor Bill Monroe, and backed by Monroe and star bluegrass duo Don Reno and Red Smiley. After Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs parted ways in 1969 and Flatt signed with RCA in 1971, he recorded primarily at RCA Studio B with his Nashville Grass. In early 1971, Flatt began recording at the studio with bluegrass stalwart Mac Wiseman.[58]

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[53] RCA Recording Session Files, Frist Library and Archive; *Music Reporter*, September 4, 1961: 6; interview with Bill Porter, November 11, 1994.

[54] Interview with Bill Porter, November 11, 1994; Ernst Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley, A Life in Music: The Complete Recording Sessions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), passim.

[55] Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley, A Life in Music*, passim.

[56] Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley, A Life in Music*, passim; *Billboard*, June 20, 1970: 31; interview with Bill Porter, September 13, 1995;

[57] Interview with Bill Porter, November 14, 1994; interview with Don Light, December 20, 2011.

[58] Michel Ruppli and Ed Novitsky, comps., *The Mercury Labels: A Discography, Vol. II: The 1956–1965 Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), 45; *Billboard*: May 26, 1962: 37; April 10, 1971: 47; interview with Lance LeRoy, December 21, 2011.

Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Bobby Bare

In 1975, Willie Nelson's self-produced Columbia album *Red Headed Stranger* won plaudits for its sparse arrangement, which stood in marked contrast to the relatively lush backgrounds of his 1960s RCA recordings—many of which were made in RCA Studio B. Some critics alleged that RCA had hindered Nelson's creativity through formulaic, pop-oriented arrangements. Atkins, while not endorsing this view, shared Nelson's frustration that the label often failed to promote Nashville's products. Studio musicians later stressed that Nelson did record chart-making singles and albums for RCA. Moreover, they argued, Nelson was musically and socially conservative during his Nashville years and didn't adopt his hip persona and stripped-down musical approach until he moved back to his native Texas in 1970.[59]

Similarly, Waylon Jennings's publicists cast him as a champion fighting RCA's Nashville establishment. In truth, RCA stuck with Jennings despite his problems with substance abuse and his erratic studio behavior, giving him advances against future royalties and financing his tours. Hits including 1968's "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line"—recorded in RCA Studio B—showed enough promise to keep him on the label. In 1976, RCA's faith paid off in the form of *Wanted! The Outlaws*, a collection of recordings by Jennings, vintage Willie Nelson cuts, and performances by singers Jessi Colter and Tompall Glaser. Some of the songs had been cut in RCA Studio B, and RCA engineer Bill Harris assembled them for what became the first million-selling country album certified by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).[60]

Although Nelson and Jennings had larger profiles as so-called "outlaws," Chet Atkins and Bobby Bare actually set the precedent for the artistic freedom Jennings ultimately gained. After Bare left RCA in 1970 to record for Mercury for some two years, Atkins enticed him to return by suggesting that he produce himself—a practice then well established in rock but virtually unheard of in country. In 1973 Bare released *Ride Me Down Easy* and *Bobby Bare Sings Lullabies, Legends, and Lies*, albums that symbolized the country music industry's transition from staff producers overseeing large artist rosters to independent producers who guided a small number of acts. Both were recorded in RCA Studio B, where Bare had cut his 1960s hits.[61]

Following Steve Sholes's death in 1968, Atkins became less and less interested in producing other artists. Under the stress of his workload as executive and artist, his health declined, and Jerry Bradley took the helm of RCA Nashville early in 1973. Atkins underwent successful surgery for colon cancer later that year. He continued to produce a handful of artists, and he retained his vice president's title until leaving RCA in 1982, but during the 1970s he focused mainly on recording his own music.[62]

For his part, Bradley kept upgrading Studio A, where he held the majority of the sessions he produced. Even so, RCA Studio B remained active, hosting sessions by the likes of RCA acts Johnny Russell, who notched a #12 country hit with the story song "Catfish John," and Gary Stewart, who topped the country charts in 1975 with his mournful "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)." As in the past, other labels continued to use RCA Studio B: Produced by her husband, Stan Silver, Dot artist Donna Fargo recorded her self-penned "Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A" in 1972. This release went #1 country and #11

[59] Willie Nelson, with Bud Shrake, *Willie: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988),105–106; Brown, *Looking Back to See*, 146; interview with Louis Nunley, April 12, 2011; interview with Bob Moore, April 15, 2011.
[60] Interview with Jerry Bradley, March 10, 2007; interview with Bobby Bare, April 20, 2011; interview with Danny Davis, November 28, 1995; interview with Bill Harris, March 10, 2007.
[61] Interviews with Bobby Bare, April 20, 2011; December 22, 2011.
[62] *Billboard*, December 16. 1972: 40.

pop in 1972, was named BMI's most performed country song in 1973, and won a 1972 Grammy for Best Country Vocal Performance, Female. Mickey Gilley, recording for the Playboy label, cut the #1 country hit "I Overlooked an Orchid" at the studio in 1974.[63]

In 1977, following longstanding disputes with the engineers' union, RCA Records closed its company studios. At this point, building owner Dan Maddox allowed the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum to use RCA Studio B during daytime hours as a staging area for school programs and as a cultural attraction for museum visitors. In 1993 the Maddox Family Foundation completed the donation of Studio B to the Country Music Foundation, Inc., which owns and operates the museum. In the meantime, RCA, having donated the three-track mixing console in September 1971, donated the studio's instruments, some of which had been used since 1957, the sixteen-channel mixing console (installed in 1971), and various tape recorders and other equipment.[68] In 1996 the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum installed observation windows for tourists and a linoleum floor that closely resembled the flooring that had been installed in the 1960s. Javelina, a recording company, held sessions in the studio during 1996, and Studio C Productions, a recording company owned by Fred Bogert, used the studio for sessions from 1997–2000. Notable albums recorded in these years include David Amram's critically acclaimed *Southern Stories*, and *Back Porch Swing*, by legendary fiddler Vassar Clements.

In 2002, the Mike Curb Family Foundation purchased the studio and leased it back to the museum in perpetuity for $1 a year. Museum staff manages the studio, supervising school programs and public tours during the day. Students in the recording program of Belmont's Mike Curb School of Music and Entertainment Business use Studio B to learn historic and present-day recording techniques.[64]

Although the studio does not host regular sessions, a number of successful artists have completed special projects there in the twenty-first century. For example, Americana singer Gillian Welch chose RCA Studio B to record her 2001 album *Time (The Revelator)*, released on Acony Records. Several leading female vocalists, including Martina McBride, Carrie Underwood, and LeAnn Rimes, added parts to vintage Elvis Presley tracks for Presley's posthumously issued *Christmas Duets* (RCA, 2008). Tradition-minded Marty Stuart issued *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions* on Sugar Hill Records in 2010. Connie Smith returned to the studio to make her well-received collection *Long Line of Heartaches* for Sugar Hill in 2011.[65]

Considering its longevity, the many culturally significant recordings made there, and the number, diversity, and excellence of the artists, producers, background singers, musicians, and engineers who have created these hits, RCA Studio B stands as one of the most important recording facilities in the United States, and indeed, the world.

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[63] Interview with Jerry Bradley, March 10, 2007; interview with Ron Oates, December 22, 2011.
[64] *Billboard*, November 29, 2005: 24.
[65] *Billboard*, August 24, 2001: 13; Elvis Presley and other artists, *Christmas Duets* (RCA, 2008); Mary Stuart, *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions* (Sugar Hill, 2010); Edd Hurt, "Miss Smith Returns," *Nashville Scene*, August 18–August 24, 2011: 47.

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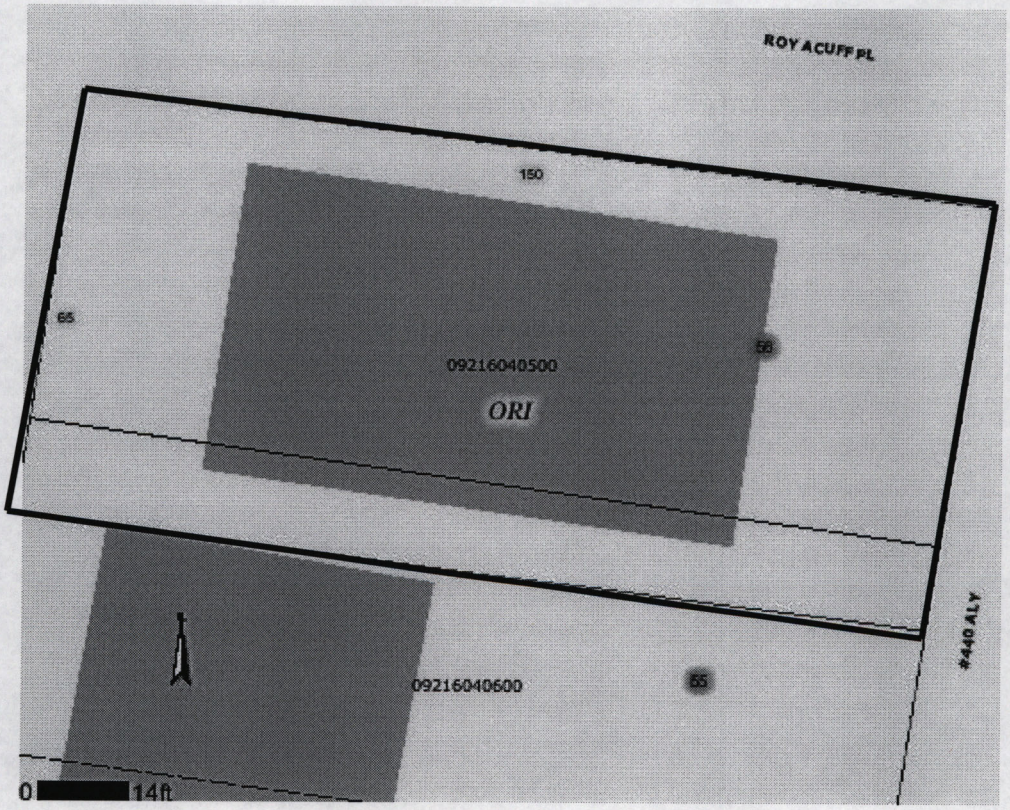
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION AND JUSTIFICATION

The nominated property is Parcel 092 160 405.00 and consists of approximately .23 acres. This includes all property associated with the RCA Studio B.



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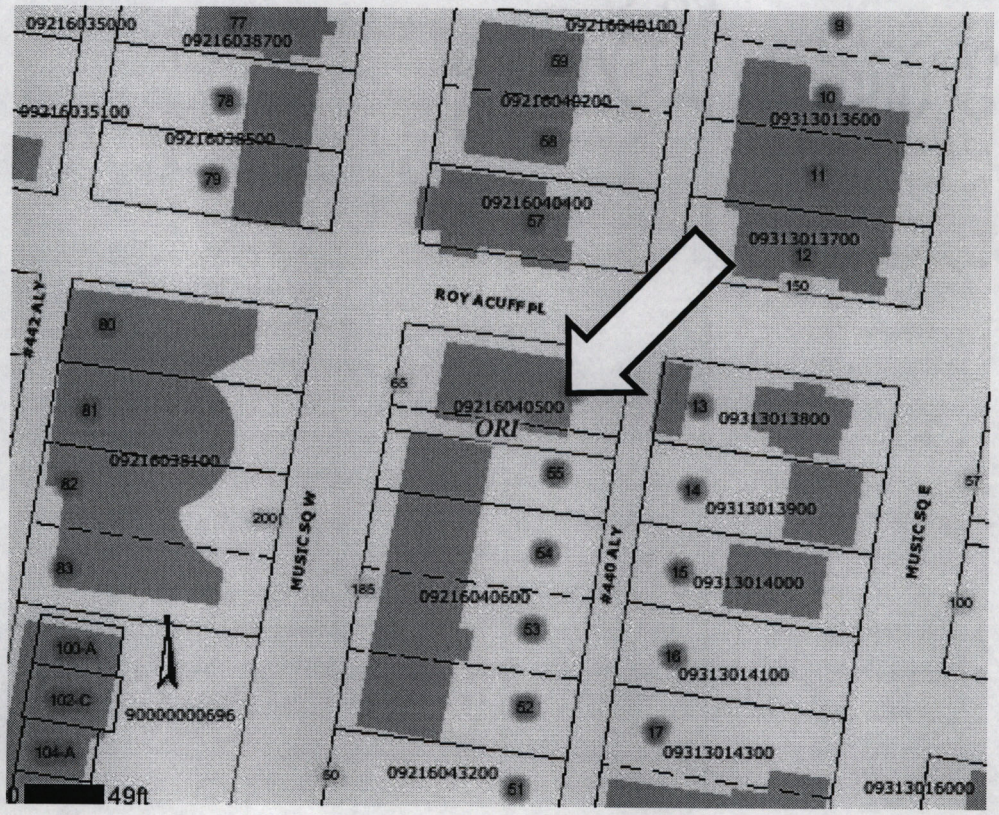

RCA Studio B in relation to adjacent parcels

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph Inventory
Photos by: Tara Mielnik and Julie Robison
Date: November 2011

01 Exterior, front (north) facade showing main entrance porch, camera facing southeast.
02 Exterior, east facade showing main public exit, camera facing west.
03 Exterior, rear (south) facade showing the rear entry and 2nd story access door, camera facing northwest.
04 Main entrance into gallery space showing the doorway to the lounge area, camera facing southwest.
05 Gallery space in 1960s addition, camera facing southeast.
06 Studio D control room showing ca.1970s control panel from Studio B control room, camera facing northeast.
07 Studio D control room, camera facing north.
08 Studio D showing window to Studio D's control room, camera facing west.
09 Studio D, camera facing east.
10 Studio D showing visitor's window into Studio B, camera facing southeast.
11 Misc. room in 1960s addition, camera facing northeast.
12 Studio B showing doors and windows into Studio B's control room, camera facing west.
13 Studio B showing the observation window from Studio D, camera facing northwest.
14 Studio B showing the rear double doors, camera facing northeast.
15 Studio B's control room showing the windows into the studio on the right and the tour observation window in the center. Camera facing north.
16 Workshop / back entrance of the lounge area showing the recording light above Studio B's control room door. Camera facing southeast.

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National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number photos Page 30

RCA Studio B
Davidson County Tennessee

Photo Key:

01

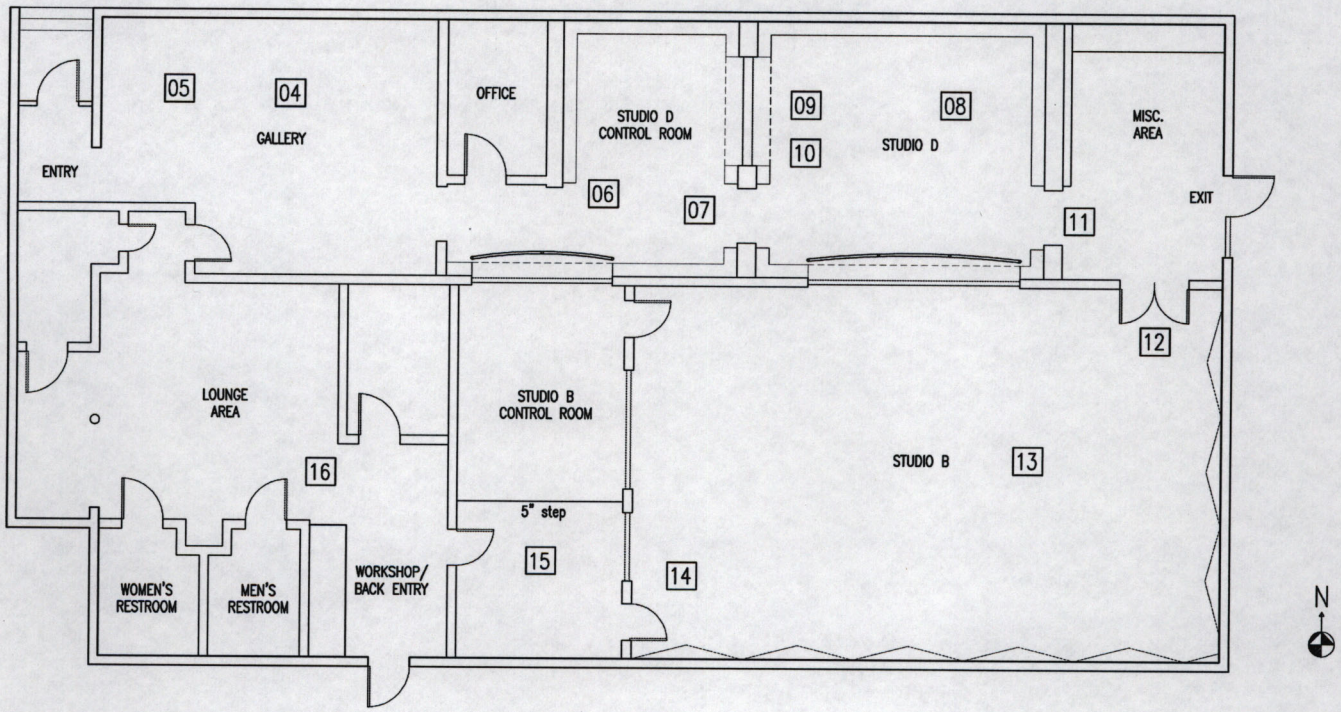

Figure 1. RCA Studio B, c. 1962 (http://countrymusichalloffame.org/studiob)

Figure 2. Chet Atkins (left) in RCA Studio B, c.1962. (http://countrymusichalloffame.org). Engineer Bill Porter is shown at right.

Figure 3. Bobby Bare (center) in Studio B (http://countrymusichalloffame.org)

Figures 4 and 5. Echo chamber. (http://countrymusichalloffame.org)

The space on the second-story is the original echo chamber. It has a highly reflective surface so that sound waves emanating from a speaker would bounce off the walls and be picked up by a microphone, with a fraction of a second delay. The microphone was routed into the mixing board, so that the engineer could use as much, or as little, of the signal from the microphone as he desired.

RCA VICTOR
STUDIO

EXIT

THE NASHVILLE SOUND

THE NASHVILLE SOUND

EXIT

SHOP
THE
MUSEUM
STORE
Elvis
Presley

DEAGAN

RECORDING
STUDIO
B
EXIT

RCA Studio B
Davidson County TN
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