

**AIR
OF THE**

**CASTLE
SOUTH**

WSM

AND THE MAKING OF

MUSIC CITY

CRAIG HAVIGHURST

Air Castle of the South

MUSIC IN AMERICAN LIFE

A list of books in the series appears at the end of this book.

AIR CASTLE OF THE SOUTH

WSM and the Making of Music City

CRAIG HAVIGHURST

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FOR MOM, DAD, AND TAYLOR

*It seems to me the radio's like drink;
it just gets a hold on you.*

—Margery Allingham

It was not the city we once knew.

—Jesse Wills

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Introduction

THE MUSE OF MUSIC CITY

On the bitter cold morning of January 8, 2002, a grassy berm at the sprawling interchange of Briley Parkway and McGavock Pike in Nashville, Tennessee, became an impromptu grandstand for protesters. More than one hundred citizens waved signs, clapped their mittens, and urged passing motorists to honk in support of traditional country music. “Keep country alive!” they chanted. “Keep country alive!” Singing legend George Jones drove up to voice support from behind the wheel of his SUV. Local honky-tonk glam character Melba Toast shouted in the wind from beneath her outlandish, platinum bouffant wig.

The rally pitched its message toward the seven-lane street and the depressed motel, fast food, and outlet mall development across it. But the protesters’ ire was directed over their shoulders, at a huge tourism and shopping complex encompassing the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center (formerly the Opryland Hotel), the Grand Ole Opry House, Opry Mills shopping mall, and, immediately behind them, the offices and studios of 650 AM WSM, the most influential and exceptional radio station in the history of country music.

They were angry because Gaylord Entertainment, the Nashville company that owned WSM and the Grand Ole Opry itself, had decided internally to drop the station’s classic country music format for an all sports/talk diet. The sounds of Johnny Cash, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Buck Owens, and Patsy Cline were to be replaced with call-in shows about NASCAR and the city’s new professional football team, the Tennessee Titans. The Grand Ole

Opry, the longest-running show in broadcasting history, was to move off WSM-AM for the first time in seventy-five years and join the Saturday night lineup of WSM-FM, a station that played only new country hits.

Gaylord was making significant investments in the Opry, and it had successfully renovated the Ryman Auditorium downtown, but in this third American institution, the company's new CEO saw a radio station with ratings and profits that were less impressive than its history. Many in the city weren't ready for such cold calculus. News of the planned format change, which had leaked to the local newspaper around Christmas, riled traditional country music fans and historically minded Nashvillians. They felt they'd seen too many icons of the city's country music past shuttered, sold, or torn down in recent years, including Opryland USA, the wooded music and amusement park Gaylord had razed in 1998 to build the enormous Opry Mills mall. Nine thousand people from around the world signed an Internet petition to "keep WSM country." Opry stars like Vince Gill and Marty Stuart publicly and personally implored Gaylord executives not to unplug country music and bluegrass from WSM, the very origin of the music's successes in Nashville. The daily newspaper editorialized that to do so would "seriously alter the sound and identity of Music City."

The protesters weren't in front of WSM to harangue it. They were there to protect it, the way a family rallies around a loved one in trouble. WSM's staff was under orders to stay inside and not talk to the media. Somebody from the Opry's corporate office did, however, send out hot coffee for everyone.



"Music City USA," Nashville's world-famous nickname, was coined at WSM. And country music defines Nashville to the world. But when announcer David Cobb ad-libbed the slogan on the air in 1950, he wasn't talking about country music per se or the country music business, because there scarcely was such a thing in Nashville at the time. Instead, from his fifth-floor perch at this Southern radio powerhouse, Cobb surveyed a remarkable music scene. It was diverse, sophisticated, and commercially viable—underdeveloped perhaps, but rich in local talent and nationally relevant at the same time. To be sure, country music was enjoying its first great nationwide heyday, with an astonishing cast of legends and would-be legends at work, including Hank Williams at the top of his game. And a new, jazz-influenced offshoot of country that would come to be known as bluegrass was in full blaze. But Cobb would have also told you about WSM maestro Francis Craig, whose "Near You" had been the top pop record of 1947, or about Pee Wee King, a Polish American Grand Ole Opry

star from Milwaukee, whose song “Tennessee Waltz” would soon become a national smash for pop singer Patti Page. Cobb was even pals with the song publishers about to make a small fortune from it.

Cobb’s friends and colleagues had left marks on Broadway and at the Metropolitan Opera. Dinah Shore, a WSM alum, had been a major star for a decade, and fellow singer Snooky Lanson was poised to join the highly visible radio/television show *Your Hit Parade*. Owen Bradley conducted superb bands, on the air and in local night clubs, years before he would produce smash records by Patsy Cline and Brenda Lee. Nashville was home to important black gospel groups, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Fairfield Four; the renowned Ryman Auditorium; the War Memorial Auditorium; and a fine symphony orchestra. Depending on what time of the week it was, David Cobb himself was a classical disc jockey, a pop music show host, and an announcer on the Grand Ole Opry.

WSM, “The Air Castle of the South,” embraced, cultivated, and evangelized on behalf of all of these disparate styles and artists. In its most influential years, when a modern music industry was maturing in Nashville between the 1940s and the 1960s, WSM was, in the words of music journalist/promoter Charlie Lamb, “the emperor of all.” The station’s leaders and employees were no mere bystanders in the development of Nashville as a music center. They instigated the revolution, nurturing a talent-rich Middle Tennessee town into a show-business phenomenon—a city with the soul of a singer, songwriter, and entertainer. WSM did more than merely give Music City its name; it nurtured Nashville’s pioneering music entrepreneurs. Its employees and alumni launched the city’s first recording studios, its first successful independent record company, its first music publishing companies, and its first independent talent agency. Owen Bradley, Nashville’s legendary producer, said his many years at WSM were his “college,” preparing him for all he achieved on Music Row. “The influence of WSM on the city of Nashville is unique in the annals of broadcasting,” wrote the show business trade magazine *Variety* in 1969. “Over a period of forty-four years, dating from the first broadcast of ‘Grand Ole Opry,’ the radio station has had a profound effect on the character and international image of the city it serves.” That city didn’t easily welcome or adapt to its new image and industry. But therein lies a tale.

WSM was first turned on in October of 1925, thanks to the efforts of Edwin Craig, a vice president of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company. A genteel and conservative man, Craig was heir apparent to a genteel and conservative firm, built and owned by a partnership involving five Tennessee families.

The company came to broadcasting reluctantly, intending only to promote a slogan—"We Shield Millions"—and generate good will in its community and among its potential customer base. But National Life and Accident lived up to its oddly providential name and spawned a chain of happy accidents for American culture. As the century unfolded, WSM more than met its stated goals of broadcasting professionalism, corporate promotion, and community service, while its unintended consequences proved historic. It gave voice to a city already brimming with musical talent and cultural ambitions. It nurtured and attracted a still larger pool of artists, writers, and entrepreneurs, many of whom were drawn to Nashville by WSM's electromagnetic force. As the enterprise grew, the station and its owners embraced and shaped a series of platforms during the slow dawning of the media age: radio, television, syndication, cable, the Internet, satellite radio, and more.

WSM is most famous—and justifiably so—as a promoter of country music and as a midwife to the modern country music industry. In 2001, *Radio & Records* magazine, a leading trade publication, named WSM country music's "Radio Station of the Twentieth Century." And historians have ably documented the Grand Ole Opry's rise from a local, unpretentious Saturday night radio show to its pinnacle of star-making power. But the Grand Ole Opry may well have lived and died like so many on-air "barn dances" of the 1920s through the 1960s had WSM not been a remarkable broadcaster in its own right. WSM's investment in talent discovery and development across many types of music built a sturdy foundation on which country music could build its permanent home in the otherwise inhospitable terrain of Nashville, Tennessee.



"A city of schools and churches," is how a character in a novel by Tennessee writer Peter Taylor described Nashville of the 1920s. It was a place, she said, "where phrases like 'well bred' and 'well born' were always ringing in one's ears and where distinctions between 'genteel people' and 'plain people' were made and where there was almost constant talk about who was a gentleman and who wasn't a gentleman." In 1927 Donald Davidson, a Vanderbilt-based writer and critic, called on Nashvillians to cultivate "a provincialism of the high-minded sort, which made Athens great."

Davidson may have been alluding to Athens of classical antiquity, but he was talking about Nashville, the self-described "Athens of the South." At a time when outsiders like the acerbic H. L. Mencken dismissed the South as a benighted "Sahara of the Bozart," Nashville saw itself as an oasis of learn-

ing and culture. The city's main park was graced with a full-scale replica of the Greek Parthenon. Downtown, a new Athenian memorial to honor war heroes included a concert hall for a burgeoning symphony orchestra. Next to that was the 1859 state capitol, whose cupola was designed after the choragic monument to Lysicrates, a site in ancient Athens where awards were given for dancing and singing. "Rival cities like Memphis, Birmingham, or Atlanta may have overshadowed Nashville in their commercial and industrial might," wrote city historian Don Doyle, "but perhaps for that reason, none cultivated the arts and letters that Nashville boasted."

At the same time, Nashvillians believed what they believed. That summer of 1925, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan squared off just down the road in Dayton, Tennessee, over John Thomas Scopes's right to teach Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The trial became a national spectacle, a larger-than-life drama that magnified and focused America's deep ideological struggle between traditionalism and modernism. The outcome was ambiguous. Schools and churches indeed.

That is to say that when WSM first went on the air, nobody outside of Nashville could have predicted, and few inside of Nashville would have wished, that the city would become a haven for show business, something that until then was only on big city résumés. Songs were written and published in New York and Chicago. Movies came from Hollywood. If the nation had a country music business center, it was arguably Atlanta, a town nearly twice the size of Nashville. Yet by 1950, Nashville's first music entrepreneurs had taken root. One explosive decade later, Nashville was the second busiest recording center in America. By 2000 Music City had launched some of the best-selling solo artists in history. Today it claims a heritage worthy of a major museum, big-time press coverage, and regular scholarly symposia. WSM, and its direct broadcasting progeny, The Nashville Network (TNN), can claim a mighty share of inspiring, imagining, and supporting that success.

This transition from religious and academic bastion to show town took place over eight decades, in a dance between station and city that moved in tempo with the times, even if (this being the South) they sometimes lagged a bit behind the beat. Nashville encountered the Depression, World War II, the fifties boom, the Civil Rights Movement, and every other large social movement of the twentieth century in ways unique to its geography and its society. Much of that dramatic history played out over the WSM airwaves, sometimes vividly, sometimes with blinders on. As the property of white, wealthy owners, WSM reflected its segregated southern surroundings, internally and on-air. African

American music, so crucial to the roots of country, was marginalized at WSM, almost certainly making country whiter than it might have been. Moreover, though WSM was a news station with a small army of reporters in the 1950s and 1960s, it downplayed the Civil Rights Movement, even as critical early developments took place blocks from National Life's WSM headquarters.

Yet in later years, WSM's essential, ingrained conservatism may have preserved its best qualities, helping it survive buffeting changes in broadcasting and the music business, as they evolved from cottage industries to global, intertwined oligopolies. WSM-AM, despite the high winds kicked up by the world rushing past it, remains locally owned and music driven, making it exceptional among the first big American radio stations.

Broadcasting, reminds historian Michele Hilmes, "brought together some of the most powerful agents in the transformation of American culture in the twentieth century—technology, advertising, big business, the federal government, mass audiences, home, and family—and combined them in ways that had never before been possible." That is just as true locally as nationally. Nashville and WSM shaped each other profoundly, as they traded information, values, money, power and—most seductively—music. It's curious that Hilmes doesn't include music in her list, because through the long reign of radio and even through the television era, music over the air changed American life, sparking social movements and political upheavals. It has given us vocabulary, perspective, and fashion, and it has provoked millions of us to dream, to dance, to write, and to perform. Only when we consider the power of music, with its pervasive, shape-shifting claim on our emotions, can we begin to understand why a city would rally to the defense of an AM radio station on the verge of something as ordinary in the modern media age as a format change.



I first became fascinated with WSM when I moved to Nashville in 1996 and began asking questions about country music, which I had recently fallen in love with, and the country music business, which was then coming down from its highest of all highs, the blockbuster global success of Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. For many, the genre of country had never been healthier or cooler in the public eye. For others, country music had been co-opted by pop music sounds, mainstream fads, and unrealistic industry expectations. This schism over the heart and soul of country music seemed packed with insight into American culture, art, and enterprise. Both interpretations could be reasonably defended, but the distance between the two sides was perplexing. Most of my questions

about what exactly had happened here led to the music's relationship with radio, and questions about country radio in Nashville led inevitably to WSM.

Great, I thought, there must be a book. And yet for all the writing about country music's past, no single work drew a line from WSM's origins to Nashville's golden age, let alone to that winter morning's protest against one more act of collective forgetting. Thus the impulse for this book. The inspiration to follow through came when I began talking to the elder statesmen and stateswomen of the industry, for it was clear that they believed WSM should be remembered as well. I was deluged with affection, passion, and memories. I have tried to sift and sort their stories into a narrative that strolls through the twentieth century, inviting the reader to decide whether an AM radio station can be a sacred thing, whether the folk art of country music is alive and well, and whether Nashville gets the attention and respect it deserves in conversations about American entertainment culture.

Nashville's quest for its own destiny is a great American story that feels like biography. So heeding Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation that "there is properly no history, only biography," that's how I've approached the subject. WSM is now a character to me, a life made of its composite influences, its accomplishments, and history's grander sweep. At more than eighty years of age, WSM feels sometimes like a shrinking light that may or may not revive for another act. For now, it asks only that we acknowledge its accumulated wisdom and listen to its story.