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ERA

Performing Nashville

*Music Tourism and
Country Music's
Main Street*

ROBERT W. FRY



Leisure Studies in a Global Era

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Performing Nashville

Music Tourism and Country Music's Main Street

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macmillan

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Leisure Studies in a Global Era

ISBN 978-1-137-50480-7

ISBN 978-1-137-50482-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50482-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017937860

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Cover image: © James Atkinson Photography / Getty Images

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

The registered company address is: The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW, United Kingdom

I dedicate this book to my wife, Laura, and our two children, Lillian and Oliver. Without their patience, support, and love, the completion of this project would not have been possible.

Acknowledgments

This book, like the performance and realization of Music City, is a collaborative effort among all those who visit, participate in, and perform at Nashville. The research for this book would have been impossible without the kindness and generosity of the many performers, colleagues, museum employees, librarians, and the many fans that I have met and befriended over the last few years.

First of all, I am thankful to Mark Wait and my faculty colleagues at Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music. Their support of my research, words of encouragement, and feedback throughout the research and writing aided in the completion and betterment of the book. I am also thankful to the many students at Vanderbilt who through class and one-on-one discussion have shared their ideas on music, place, and fandom and have caused me to look at and analyze Nashville in new and exciting ways. I would especially like to thank Justin Worley and Brittany Chase who in addition to frequent discussion joined me in downtown Nashville when talking to the many fans on Lower Broadway.

I would like to thank the city of Nashville and the hospitality of all those with whom I have come in contact. I would especially like to thank Greg Reish, Director of MTSU's Center for the Study of Popular Music, and Dale Cockrell, former director; Ryan Darrow, Librarian at the Nashville Public Library Special Collections; Joshua Bronnenberg, Museums and Tours Manager at the Ryman Auditorium; Peter Cooper,

Editor at the Country Music Hall of Fame; Becky Miley, Librarian at the Country Music Hall of Fame Archive; Justin Croft, Studio Manager at RCA B and Luke Gilfeather, former manager; and Mark Hughes, Owner and Manager of Willie Nelson and Friends Museum. Each of these individuals shared with me stories, memories, thoughts on, and a history of Nashville and its musical traditions that far surpass what has been documented in historical and scholarly work. In addition, they offered assistance in the research process that made this book possible.

Throughout the course of my research, I have had the unique opportunity of meeting and talking with musicians. I would especially like to thank Julia Cole, Bill Anderson, Zeus Oozak, Grayson Rodgers, John and Jacob, and Hayward Bishop who volunteered their time and expertise, offering a musician's perspective on the current and past performance of Nashville.

I would also like to thank the many country music fans I have met over the last few years. Your dedication to Nashville and country music inspired and shaped this book. I would especially like to thank the many fans whose festival experiences and memories are retold in the following pages. They have served as informants and friends, and without their contributions, this book would have been impossible.

I would like to thank my parents, Robert and Barbara Fry, who have offered support throughout my life. Because of their words of encouragement, I have never had any doubt that I could complete this or any other endeavor. Their motivation and love have inspired me to be the best scholar and person that I can be.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Laura Fry, and my beautiful children, Lillian and Oliver. Throughout the course of the research, writing, and editing of this book, they have offered me love, patience, and support. I would especially like to thank my wife for being both my number one fan and critic, ensuring me that I was capable of such a project and motivating me to keep going. Throughout this project she has listened, offered ideas, and served as a role model in research and writing. Her scholarship is my inspiration and the model of excellence that I aim to achieve.

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1

Class on Tour: An Experiential Approach to Teaching and Researching Popular Music

In 2001, during my graduate studies in musicology at Ohio University, I had the unique opportunity to teach a history of British popular music in London for a fine arts study-abroad program. I had been teaching classes in popular music at Ohio University for two years and felt well prepared to lecture on the impact of British music and artists on the birth and development of the larger global popular-music industry. I arrived in London equipped with recordings, readings, films, guidebooks, and PowerPoint presentations, eager to teach popular music in one of its most famed places of production and performance. Ohio University had rented a classroom in London's Florida State University Student Centre. The class space was, however, available only one day per week, forcing me to leave the confinement and comfort of the classroom and take students directly to the musical sites we were discussing. When covering the British folk and blues revival, for example, we toured the sites of London's famed blues, jazz, and skiffle clubs and experienced the blues live at Ain't Nothin But the Blues Club in Soho. When discussing the Sex Pistols, we visited Vivienne Westwood's World's End on Kings Court Road and were lucky enough to see an exhibit of Westwood's fashion designs that was

concurrently displayed at the Victoria Albert Museum. When discussing Beatlemania, we took a tour with Richard Porter, former president of the London Beatles fan club, who took us to sites throughout the city and gave us insight into the history of the band, their connection to the British landscape, their impact on popular music, and the fans' connection to the band.¹

Like many of the students, this was my first trip to London. In the days, sometimes mere hours, before each class, I could be found hurriedly trekking through the city with a notepad and guidebook mapping out the next group outing and attempting to stay at least one step ahead of the students. While I knew the history of popular music in London as presented in textbooks, liner notes, and documentary films, I soon realized that I was clueless of where that history had actually happened and the geographical placement of and influence on the many styles and artists we were discussing. Although I presented myself to students and to British locals as the “professor,” I was just as amazed and awestruck as the students were by the unexpected musical and social experiences we were having. London's places of performance, production, and preservation reinforced the information I had read in rock history books while also meeting my own fan and tourist expectations of musical and cultural otherness and authenticity.² In addition, my understanding of popular music strengthened as the students and I went beyond musical sound, personality, and story to include the geographical and socio-political influences that had shaped the sounds we were studying.

The initial class plan, which I had outlined from a carrel in the Ohio University library weeks before, had been to teach the history of British popular music through a historical and canonical approach, using specific landmarks and musical sites to reinforce and illustrate both the music and the artists we were to study. Place was to be a mere backdrop to the history, a living museum of sorts, that would bring the object of study—the music—to life. However, the limited time for classroom instruction and the resulting and unexpected formation of the class through my

¹ Richard Porter continues to offer public and private Beatles tours of London. Descriptions of tours and booking information can be found at <http://www.beatlesinlondon.com>

² Places of performance, production, and preservation as categories of tourist sites were borrowed from Chris Gibson and John Connell (2005) and will be used throughout the manuscript.

own tourist gaze resulted in a presentation of popular music that moved beyond significant recordings, styles, and artists and toward a focus on the ways we as music fans, through the theatrics of fandom and tourism, interact with the music, the artists, the place, and the myths of the popular-music industry.³

Such a gaze and the resulting ethnographic methodologies, including social observation and the analysis of and participation within the larger fan community and London's musical tourist agenda, led to fascinating and fruitful class meetings in which students discussed the music through both cultural and musical analyses. Such a dual analysis also provided a veil of academia for students and professor alike, resulting in the illusion that we were not tourists but were, instead, informed and educated scholars studying musical sound and the sociology of music tourism and reception. As a class, we perceived our time in London as an educational endeavor; we were drawn to the city to experience something new and edifying, to take part in something educationally unique from our regular academic careers and lives in Athens, Ohio. It was a type of experiential education that allowed us, as a class, to step outside of the institution where history and culture were preserved and analyzed and that permitted us to participate within cultural spaces where history was made. We soon noticed, however, that our interest in the city as a social and sonic environment that influenced and fostered pop stars, new technologies, iconic music, and influential youth cultures mirrored the interests of the mere "tourists." While we supposed our intent to be different, rooted in academia and reflective of its scholarly rigor, through tours and onsite lectures, we united with fans and tourists through shared stories of music's past and present, of pop music and meaning, and through the collective performance of London's places of performance and production. Through these experiences, we felt stronger and more intimate connections to the artists, their music, geographical and cultural spaces, and the larger body of music fans we were observing and quickly becoming invested in and a part of.

It was during these classes and in discussions with students and colleagues that I first became interested in fandom and music tourism as a

³The tourist gaze as a set of expectations of the tourist was defined by John Urry (2002).

subject of research. Through the class' realization of our multiple roles as scholars, tourists, and music fans, we began to realize the fine and often vague line between academic and tourist and came to terms with our dual role as both researchers and the subjects of the research. In the introduction to his book, *Culture on Tour*, Edward Bruner poses the question: "Was I a closet ethnographer on tour, or a closet tourist doing ethnography?" (Bruner 2004, p. 2). Bruner's question illustrates obvious yet often overlooked similarities between tourist and scholar. Differences arguably exist in their initial intent and the rigor of the study, yet both are attracted to specific sites or sounds through what is perceived to be an opportunity to observe and participate in a cultural experience unobtainable in everyday life. For both music fans and scholars, these experiences are often connected to specific locations that serve as places of creation and continuance of the celebrated and/or researched tradition. These experiences of musical, cultural, and geographical authenticity are therefore deemed real through the fans' and scholars' opportunity to experience not only the music but also its geographical placement and origins. To walk in the footsteps of musical idols, to stand in a studio where hit songs were recorded, and/or to visit geographical and man-made locations mentioned in past and current songs or seen on album covers bring music to life and connects the sound to a specific place and/or object.

Through a connection to place, recorded music, which through the recording industry and the rise of virtual sound catalogs has become increasingly placeless and ephemeral, is reconnected to its geographical roots and to the fan's desire for belonging to a community. It is in this connection that we as music fans and scholars connect to the music and the music culture being observed. In an age of increased social and musical isolation due to mp4s and iPods, the need for place or a sense of geographical connectivity to sound seems heightened. The touring of cultural sites including those connected to popular music allows us to go beyond the individual ephemeral to also experience music through the collective visceral. Place becomes a space for performing and interacting with the music tradition rather than a mere backdrop for the tradition. The centrality of the performance allows fans, for a brief time, to enter and become part of the tradition. Philosopher Edward Casey states: "Places not only are, they happen. (And it is because they happen that they

lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or as story)” (Casey 1996, p. 27). For fans, musical soundscapes happen through their interaction with the past in the present in a place that serves as a living stage for both. The ways we remember, apply meaning, and share these collective experiences further reinforce the similarities between tourism and ethnography and serve as the inspiration for this project.

Touring the Field

The music researcher seeks to capture, translate, analyze, and present a portrait of the music culture being studied. Typically, an analysis is based upon photographs, interviews, archival research, video and sound recordings, and documentation of the researcher’s own personal experiences. Once collected and theorized, the findings are shared with colleagues through academic conferences, publications, lectures, and term papers where the “expert” shares his/her experience with others who, like the researcher, are fascinated with experiences of and interaction with musical and cultural otherness.

The tourist or fan, while he/she does not approach the culture with the same type of academic rigor, leaves the site with a very similar snapshot, obtained through a collection of tourist commodities such as photographs, recordings, souvenirs, communal interactions, and memories of his/her own engagement with the tourist destination and its “unique” cultural objects. Like researchers, tourists analyze and share their findings with colleagues through “unofficial” living room lectures and water-cooler conferences, where the one who has visited the site, and holds the objects that validate the pilgrimage, shares his/her experiences with those who will not or have not yet interacted with the destination.

There are obvious similarities in the collection and presentation of both travelers’ experiences, but academia is clear to mark the difference between tourist and ethnographer. The tourist is believed to be naïve in his/her acceptance of the cultural production, blindly accepting the staged authenticity created by the tourist industry for the tourist. The ethnographer, on the other hand, is expected to see past the facade and document speculative reasons for the production, noting what such a simulation

can inform us about the tourist space and society more broadly. However, in the production and collective performance of a musical space through the theatrics of tourism, the line between reality and staged authenticity is often blurred, exemplified by my London course. While our interaction with the sights and sounds of the city was validated through the academic veil, we were tourists of the spaces we visited and fans of the music we discussed. Such a realization resulted in a move away from the standard historical and canonical approach to popular-music pedagogy and instead toward a focus on music fandom and tourism and its importance in and to the popular-music industry. We, like tourists, desired the backstage experience, an illusion that was reinforced by the “insider” knowledge presented to us through the veil of academia. Through the theatrics of tourism, we became more connected to the music we were studying, going beyond historically significant artists and songs to better understand the music’s connection to place and to the people who identified with popular music’s sounds and images. At the end of that semester abroad, I returned to the USA and, having graduated from Ohio University, pursued further graduate studies at Florida State University, where I once again taught the popular-music canon from a textbook in a windowless lecture hall. However, I continued to research music tourism and the act of fandom and travel as performance art, and I concluded my graduate studies with a dissertation on blues fandom and cultural tourism in the Mississippi Delta.⁴

The King Biscuit Festival

Conducting ethnographic work at the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, Arkansas, introduced me to a number of blues fans whose stories caused me to reevaluate my research and the story I wanted to tell.⁵

⁴The section titled “Touring the Field” also appears in an earlier version in my unpublished dissertation: *We are the Blues: Individual and Communal Performances of the King Biscuit Tradition*. The dissertation can be downloaded and read at diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:182523/datastream/PDF/.../citation.pdf

⁵The King Biscuit Festival is an annual event that draws thousands of blues fans to the Arkansas Delta to experience the best in blues music and Southern food and culture. Information on the

My initial plans were to document the organizations and individuals responsible for the creation and operation of the festival. I spent years talking to festival organizers, locals, and musicians and digging through archives, paying little attention to the thousands of people with their faces and cameras turned toward the stage. With a press pass around my neck, I spent most of my festival time at the front of the crowd near the stage, photographing some of the great bluesmen while trying to score an interview. I was interested in tourism, but I was ignoring the tourist; interested in the role of fandom in the blues industry but only talking to artists. At the 2007 festival, I turned around once to gaze at the audience, and it clicked. The story on stage had been told repeatedly; the story in the crowd had not. The following few years of my festival attendance were spent in the crowd, at the campsite, at local restaurants, and at the temporary and permanent residences of festival participants. The stories that emerged as I talked to and observed fans were ones of identity formation, remembrance, and transformed traditions, experiences that relied on the blues as an object, an idea, and a soundtrack but were secondary to the performative experiences obtained at the festival. In addition, the research caused me to better understand my own love for and fandom of American music and the importance of its geographical origin. In the process of immersion, I simultaneously became the researcher and the researched.

This book is about country-music tourism, yet many of the themes in the book are similar to those I discovered while researching the blues. This was not a forced connection, but an organic one. Many of the fans are different, and they make musical distinctions between the two styles. However, themes within the music and what these styles represent are undeniably similar. Both genres signify American tradition and a collective identity that seem to defy the rapidly changing society around them. The sound of the music may change, but the themes remain similar, suggesting a continued tradition rooted in an idealized and performed past. An interaction with the home of country music or the blues is therefore the opportunity to interact with a theatrical space that permits a performance of the desired past and of belonging. The time that I spent in

Helena, Arkansas, helped to formulate my thoughts on tourism and led me to recognize the importance of fans and the insightfulness of their observations. It was years later that my experiences and observations in London and in Helena transformed into an experiential classroom opportunity for students at Vanderbilt University, realized by my own fascination for country music and my amazement at having the opportunity to talk about and teach this rich musical tradition within the city revered as its home.

Teaching Popular Music in Nashville

In 2007, I began teaching popular-music courses at Vanderbilt University. I was immediately struck by the fact that, although we were in such close proximity to many of the sites we were discussing in class, such a small number of students had previously visited these sites or even knew of their historical significance or geographical placement. The Ryman Auditorium—the “Carnegie Hall of the South,” “Mother Church of Country Music,” and long-time home of the Grand Ole Opry—is only two miles from my classroom. The Grand Ole Opry, which weekly features the biggest names of country music, is only nine miles away. The famed Music Row and its most revered surviving studios, including RCA Studios A and B, the Quonset Hut, and Columbia, are a short walk from campus.⁶ Within these famed places of performance and production, artists such as Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Chet Atkins, Elvis Presley, Charley Pride, Bob Dylan, Ray Charles, the Everly Brothers, Jim Reeves, and Patsy Cline had recorded and helped shape the popular-music industry. Alongside the historical studios, current music, alive and vibrant, is daily recorded and disseminated to the masses of country-music fans around the globe. The strong presence of the current and historical tradition is reinforced by the many music venues throughout the city that feature live music nightly. These clubs, including 3rd and Lindsley, The Bluebird Café,

⁶Maps of Nashville and its tourist district can be found at <http://www.visitmusiccity.com/visitors/thingstodo/mapsandtransportation>

the Station Inn, Robert's Western World, and Exit/In, host artists performing a mixture of new music and covers, reminding fans of the city's historical legacy while demonstrating that music is still being made. Nashville's simultaneous historical relevancy and current vibrancy produces a rare musical space where narratives of country past are reinforced by and simultaneously reinforce in turn the current and vibrant industry occurring outside museum walls. This dichotomy is unique among music cities and makes Nashville stand out as a place of historical significance and current relevancy. While there are many music cities across the USA, most attract fans because of what previously happened there, rather than what is currently happening. In many of these musical spaces, museum walls serve as barriers between the tradition that once was and the reality that exists in the present. Nashville, on the other hand, uses this past/present dichotomy to construct a space that validates the tourist experience, placing music fans within the city's musical and performative tradition. This past/present and backstage/frontstage relationship in the performance of Nashville will be explored throughout this book.

Vanderbilt University's location near downtown Nashville provides students with unlimited live music opportunities, access to local musicians and industry executives, onsite and experiential music experiences, and the chance to interact with the sounds and personalities of historic country music through the many music museums and their artifacts, yet many rarely take advantage of these opportunities. Class sizes, limited time for instruction, rigorous course work and high academic expectations, and lack of personal transportation result in continued reliance on standard classroom pedagogy that teaches the popular-music canon from a textbook and a CD set in a windowless classroom, reinforcing to students that although history happened nearby, it can be learned only within academia's confined classroom spaces. In an attempt to repair this disconnect between Nashville and Vanderbilt communities, I created the class Music City Museums and Memorabilia, an onsite and ethnographic study of music, tourism, and fandom, an educational experience that has changed the way I think about and teach popular music and serves as the foundation for the pages to follow.

Music City Museums and Memorabilia

In 2009, I wanted to develop a summer course in popular-music studies for Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music. After some consideration, I combined my previous study-abroad experience with my vision for taking the Vanderbilt classroom into the Nashville musical community to teach music history at the spaces where history was once the present. I therefore designed the course using Chris Gibson's and John Connell's *Music and Tourism: "On the Road Again"* as a model (Gibson and Connell 2005). The authors' discussion of tourist sites as places of performance, production, and preservation shaped the class and allowed me to move beyond what happened at these spaces to also explore the spaces' presentation and the fan's interpretation of the sites, the musical tradition, and/or the artist. Concerned with both a history of Nashville music and the performative nature of tourism, the course gave students the opportunity to embrace their own role as fans in the production of Nashville while also allowing them to interact with Nashville's famed music history and its vibrant present. This class was focused on a specific musical place, but the themes of popular music present in Nashville resulted in a dialogue that went far beyond a history of country music to also include the role of all popular music in American society and, more specifically, the role of popular music in the lives of the class participants. In a 2001 article titled "Introducing the Experiential Learning Spiral," Gloree Rohnke defines experiential education as follows: "Experiential education can be described as a term for how learners translate personal and collective experience through social and cultural filters into personal discovery, performing a process of viewing the experiential components from different angles, perceptions, and vantage points" (Rohnke 2001, p. 33). A class focused on music tourism and fan culture encourages this type of experiential learning and personal discovery. The following brief description of the class will illustrate what I believe to be the benefits of touring the canon or teaching music through tourism and the performances of fandom and ethnography as pedagogy for popular music education.

On the first day, I introduce an overview of the history and sociology of travel in addition to a brief history of Nashville's musical and social

history, present, and legacy. Questions as simple as why do we travel, who travels, why are we attracted to specific sites or musical genres, how is sound put on display, and what is the role of the tourist/fan in the production, performance, and preservation of a cultural space result in a rich sociological study of both tourism and music fandom. Through the discussion, the connection between landscape and soundscape is introduced, along with the role of each scape in authenticating the other and the importance of tourist/fan expectations to the country-music sound and its physical and experiential presentation and performance. Students begin to recognize that themes regularly and stereotypically heard in country music, such as family values, patriotism, the working class, rural life, spirituality, and home, are not only stated through lyrics and reinforced through musical sound, but are also found in the genre's physical and experiential representation in the recording iconography and in the many tourist sites throughout the city. Following this introduction, students board a van for their first tour of the city. Because of their excitement to see and/or interact with the Ryman, the Country Music Hall of Fame, Printer's Alley, Jefferson Street, and Music Row, students immediately take on a dual role as both researcher and the subject of the research. They are simultaneously drawn to the tourist agenda and encouraged to question its presentation—what is included, and what is left out? Their dual role as eager fan and critical scholar results in an educational experience that allows students to fully grasp history, how it is made and how it continues to be presented, the close relationship between place and sound, and the vital role of the fan in the production of the tourist site and, in the case of Nashville, the sound that is the city's key draw.

Throughout the semester, the class visits, interacts with, analyzes, and writes about famed venues, studios, and tourist sites throughout the Nashville area, such as the Ryman Auditorium, the Country Music Hall of Fame, RCA Studio B, the Quonset Hut, Fisk University, Lower Broadway, and Printer's Alley. As a class, we attend a broadcast of the Grand Ole Opry, experience a songwriter night at the Bluebird Café, and attend a Time Jumpers concert at 3rd and Lindsley. We take driving tours of less-visited music sites, including Jefferson Street, Nashville's home of Rhythm and Blues; Fisk University, home of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, arguably the city's most historically influential and important musical

site; and Nashville's Centennial Park, an important space for nineteenth-century live music, reminding students that Nashville was a "music city" long before it was country music's epicenter. The class also features a number of guest speakers, both in class and onsite, such as emerging artist Julia Cole, who shares her insight on the industry and the importance of building a relationship with fans; a private tour of Gruhn's Guitars with owner George Gruhn himself, who takes us around his shop while providing insight into his love for guitars and ruminations on the reasons people collect instruments; a private tour of RCA Studio B with former studio manager and producer Luke Gilfeather or studio tour guides, who reinforce the myths of the studio with a back-region tour of the control booth where the technology and the recording process responsible for the famed "Nashville Sound" came alive; and a walking tour of Music Row with studio drummer Hayward Bishop, a highlight for the class. On this tour, I as the musicologist share the history of the recording and performative spaces, while Bishop as a studio musician who recorded in these spaces shares personal stories of interaction with other musicians, engineers, and the space itself, providing a tour that presents itself as a backstage experience for the class.

For each site visited, students are assigned corresponding readings and are given a series of questions to be answered through observation, participation, and personal experience. Students then discuss their findings with peers in class and on a communal class blog. Through research, participation, and discussion, students explore the history of country music but also the process of historiography and the sociology of historical interpretation rooted in fandom and music tourism. While the class moves away from a canonical approach to popular music, the students seem to better understand the meaning of popular music in the twenty-first century and, in the process, gain a better understanding of popular-music history and its accompanying performance and presentation by academia and the recording, broadcasting, and tourism industries.

While Nashville's status as the "home" of country music and the current country-music industry offers unique pedagogical opportunities, popular music is performed in every college town or city in America. I believe that onsite and experiential education can be adapted within these spaces, offering a new way of exploring all music and its ever-changing

role in the American and global soundscape. Experiential education has shaped my interest in fandom and tourism studies and serves as the foundation for my teaching methodology and my research on Nashville and country music and their presentation and performance by the music and tourist industries. The onsite tours and class discussions conducted with Vanderbilt students have provided me with a place to hatch many ideas and themes on music, tourism, and fandom and serve as the inspiration for this book's thesis.

Nashville continues to be identified worldwide with country music. In light of this association, locations of creativity, performance, and production have become sites of interest for a growing number of music fans interested in both the history and continuation of the country-music industry. While Nashville's recording and broadcasting history has been well documented, little has been written on country-music fan culture, the fan's significant role in the performance and preservation of Nashville, the changing demographic of the country-music fan, and the heightened role of music fandom in the age of social media. In this book, I present a study that explores the formation and continuance of Nashville, Tennessee, as a tourist destination and as a music place. In the process, I shed light on the importance of the fans (tourists) in creating Nashville's multifaceted musical identity, and the music and city's influence on the formation and performance of the individual and collective identities of the country-music fan. In so doing, I illustrate that these multifaceted identities emerged from and have evolved through a history of complex socio-musical interactions among host and guest cultures, individuals, institutions, and technologies. More importantly, I explore the larger issue of country music as a signifier of "tradition," arguing that for many attendants, the music serves as a soundtrack, while Nashville serves as a performative space that permits the creation, performance, and remembrance of not only the country-music tradition but also individual and collective traditions along with a romanticized American identity.

This book, therefore, provides insight into the role of the fan, both local and visitor, in the establishment, performance, and realization of a music place. Through the theatrics of tourism, Nashville and its connection to country music are performed daily, meeting the desires of both host and guest communities. While Nashville and its musical traditions