

QUONSET HUT
34 Music Square East
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS TN-268
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

QUONSET HUT

HABS No. TN-268

Location: 34 Music Square East, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

The coordinates for this building are 36.149194 N, -86.791999 W and they were obtained through Bing maps (www.bing.com/maps/) on July 11, 2012. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: In 1955 brothers Harold and Owen Bradley, two Nashville-based musicians, bought a residential property at 804 16th Ave South and refurbished it to house a recording studio. This move is now credited as marking the birth of the Nashville neighborhood today known as Music Row. Shortly afterwards, they purchased a Quonset hut kit because they needed more space for their recording work. The hut was erected to the rear of the 804 16th Ave South property. The Bradleys called the resulting small complex “Bradley’s Film and Recording Studio.”¹

The brothers had intended that the Quonset Hut be primarily used for video production (television was the coming thing at the time and was predicted to bring about the demise of radio industry). However, demand for their audio recording facilities and expertise was such that the hut functioned primarily as an audio studio. Many seminal sessions took place within it while it was under the aegis of the Bradleys, among them the ones in which Patsy Cline sang “Crazy” and Brenda Lee performed “I’m Sorry”.

In 1962, the Bradleys sold their complex to Columbia Records. Over the next several years, expansion meant that both the house and the hut were built on to and the Quonset Hut was covered over and absorbed into a much larger building. Nonetheless, Columbia continued to use the hut as a recording venue until 1982.

In 2005, the complex at 34 Music Square East (the new name of 16th Ave South in the Music Row area) was purchased by the foundation belonging to music businessman Mike Curb. Around four years later, the Quonset Hut was refurbished for use as a modern working studio and as a classroom for Belmont University’s Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business.²

Description: A Quonset hut is a large, prefabricated metal building with a curved roof that was used extensively by the military during World War II. This particular Quonset Hut was erected to the rear of the former residential property at 804 16th Ave South. Once assembled, it measured approximately 78 feet by 35 feet and reached 35 feet high and was subsequently adapted to house a recording studio and control room.

During the mid-1960s, the Quonset Hut was covered over and subsumed into a larger building complex (which also includes the former house at 804 16th Ave South). In 1982,

¹ Michael Kossler, *How Nashville Became Music City, USA: Fifty Years of Music Row* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 11.

² Peter Cooper, “Nashville Skyline,” *Mix Professional Audio and Music Production* (November 2009), <http://mixonline.com/studios/design/nashville-skyline-november-1109/> (accessed July 13, 2012).

it was closed down as a recording studio and was used for other purposes. In ca. 2009, it was refurbished for use as a modern working studio and as a classroom.³ The curved shape of the roof remains evident on the interior and a small portion of it can be viewed from outside the rear of the building (see Figure 1). Otherwise there is little to indicate that the Quonset Hut remains in situ.

History: In 1955 brothers Harold and Owen Bradley, two Tennessee-born and Nashville-based musicians, bought a residential property at 804 16th Ave South and converted it into a recording studio. This move is now credited as marking the birth of Music Row - the Nashville neighborhood famed for its association with the music industry. Shortly afterwards, the brothers bought a Quonset hut kit because they wanted to gain more space for their expanding recording operation. Once the hut had been assembled to the rear of the original house, the Bradleys called the resulting small complex "Bradley's Film and Recording Studio."⁴

The Bradley brothers were both extremely able multi-instrumentalists. Owen Bradley, born in 1915, was the senior of the pair by ten years. He had been a music director at the Nashville radio station WSM, led a dance band and gained experience of producing recordings during the early 1950s. Harold, meanwhile, was in demand around town as a session and back-up rhythm guitarist.⁵ Bradley's Film and Recording Studio was the third such venture the brothers had set up in Nashville and they were by no means alone in their move into offering commercial music services. In fact, in the years since the end of the Second World War, the city had witnessed a proliferation of local recording facilities, independent record labels and other music-related businesses, in line with its status as a nascent commercial music center. Much of this activity built on the success of the WSM country music show, the *Grand Ole Opry*, and became so notable that by 1950, *Variety* was describing the city as a "small edition of New York's Tin Pan Alley."⁶ Three years later *Billboard* declared it "a beehive of activity in the country music field" and "the new Music City U.S.A."⁷

The area in which the Bradleys set up their third studio, now known as Music Row, is bounded by McGavock Street to the north, 16th Avenue on the east (later renamed Music Square East), Wedgewood Ave to the south, and 20th Ave South on the west.⁸ It had initially been developed as a residential neighborhood and many of its original buildings were constructed to accommodate wealthy residents prior to the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ Toward the northern part of the area, for example, the houses were "opulent two- and three-story Victorian mansions, set back from the street, each enclosed inside wrought iron fences."¹⁰ However, the neighborhood declined as the twentieth century progressed with many of those living in the area being adversely affected by the Great

³ Cooper.

⁴ Kossler, 11.

⁵ Rich Kienzle, "Harold Bradley," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49-50; Robert K. Oermann, "Owen Bradley," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 50-51.

⁶ *Variety* (25 October 1950), quoted in Rumble, "The Emergence of Nashville as a Recording Center: Logbooks from the Castle Studio, 1952-53," *Journal of Country Music* 7, no. 3 (December 1978): 27.

⁷ "Nashville," *Billboard* (3 October 1953): 45. Accessed via <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> 26 August 2012.

⁸ John Lomax III, "The Center of Music City: Nashville's Music Row," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 385.

⁹ Kossler, ix.

¹⁰ Lomax, 386.

Depression and the Second World War.¹¹ By 1955, when the Bradleys moved in, many of the once grand homes were in a state of decay and the area had been rezoned for commercial use.¹²

The Bradleys purchased 804 16th Ave South for \$7500 and refurbished it according to the specifications they deemed necessary for a working studio. They already had a deal in place to do regular sessions for Decca Records and they bought the Quonset hut kit and had it erected to the rear of the property to afford them more space.¹³ Owen Bradley had intended that the hut be used primarily for video production (television was the coming thing at the time) and initially that was the case, with many Army and Air Force recruiting films and country music shows made for syndication being shot there.¹⁴ However, demand for the Bradleys' audio recording facilities and expertise was such that in time, the Hut functioned primarily as an audio studio.

The transformation of the wartime metal hut into a sound recording venue was carried out by Owen Bradley and the sound engineer Mort Thomasson, although neither man had been trained in such matters. According to Harold Bradley, it was all done by ear:

They knew that the bass would rumble around the room, so they trapped the bass sound with big curtains in the corners, and they would just work here and there with baffles to separate some of the sounds. Owen got very sophisticated (...). He came up with the "shed houses" I call 'em, which were isolation booths. When it was mono it was all mixed together, but when he went to stereo and he could separate the sounds, he could hear either the bass going into the drum mic or the drums going into the base mic, so he put a baffle between 'em.¹⁵

Further improvements included a framework being built near the ceiling and draped with green burlap in order to insulate the space from the sound of raindrops hitting the metal roof during inclement weather. According to Jerry Bradley, Owen Bradley's son, another addition was a "square louvered thing that was held up by chains, and they got an old curtain, which they threw up there, so when the sound hit the floor or the walls, it went up, it never came back down, it didn't reflect."¹⁶

Serendipity provided the brothers with a means of correcting some of the problems caused by the tile floor, which had a "ping" in it that led to a bad echo: someone renting the hut for a filming project covered each side of it with wood and, according to Harold Bradley, that "evened out the sound and made it a fantastic studio. It was live enough that your instruments or your voice sounded great, but it also absorbed the sound better than any way you could have planned it."¹⁷ Meanwhile, engineer Mort Thomasson

¹¹ Lomax, 386.

¹² Harold Bradley, interviewed by Douglas B Green, transcript, 17 January 1974, Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, TN.

¹³ In 1958, Owen Bradley became head of Decca's Nashville office.

¹⁴ Jim Sparks, "An Interview with Owen Bradley," *Advantage Magazine* (October 1984): 34.

¹⁵ Kosser, 12.

¹⁶ Kosser, 13.

¹⁷ Kosser, 155.

determined that “tile thirteen” - a spot near to the control room - was especially conducive to capturing a good sound from the singer.¹⁸

Among the key sessions that took place in the Quonset Hut while the Bradleys owned it were the ones in which Patsy Cline recorded “Crazy” and Brenda Lee performed “I’m Sorry.”¹⁹ Those recordings - and others like Marty Robbins’ “El Paso” and Johnny Horton’s “Battle of New Orleans” - meant that the hut became strongly associated with the “Nashville Sound,” of which Owen Bradley was a chief architect (along with Chet Atkins at RCA’s Studio B). The Nashville Sound was an approach to recording country music that developed in the mid-1950s and remained dominant throughout the 1960s. It came about as a means of counteracting the dampening effect the popularity of rock and roll was having on country music sales. Its characteristics included pop-sounding singers, string and horn sections (instead of fiddle and banjo), and background choruses.²⁰

The Bradleys sold both the 804 12th Ave studio and the Quonset Hut to Columbia Records in 1962.²¹ During the mid-1960s, as Columbia expanded, they began to build on to both the house at 804 16th Ave South and the Quonset Hut so that they eventually became subsumed within a much larger complex.²² Even so, the Hut remained heavily used as Columbia’s Studio B. In 1969, the control room to the Quonset Hut was completely renovated and a new sixteen track console was installed. The producer and sound engineer Lou Bradley, who started working in the Quonset Hut in June of that year, described it at that time as having walls that were a combination of rough wood with large panels of acoustic tiles.²³

Among some of the major artists who recorded sessions in the Quonset Hut while it was run by Columbia were Tammy Wynette, Charlie Rich and Tanya Tucker.²⁴ The last song recorded in the Quonset Hut for Columbia was “Swingin’” by John Anderson and in 1982, the hut was closed as a working studio.²⁵ The reasons for its closure were various but included the increasingly tendency of artists to prefer to work in studios of their choosing rather than in one belonging to their designated record label; the unwillingness of record labels to constantly update their in-house facilities with the latest equipment; and, in the case of Columbia Records specifically, the need for more space to use for non-recording activities. When Columbia closed the Quonset Hut down as a studio, it became home to their art department instead.²⁶ The wood that lined the structure was sold off in pieces as souvenirs.²⁷

In 1987 Columbia was taken over by Sony, which in turn merged with BMG and the Nashville operation was moved from the 16th Ave South location (by this time called

¹⁸ Kossler, 14.

¹⁹ Cooper.

²⁰ Bill Ivey, “The Nashville Sound,” in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 371-372.

²¹ Owen Bradley then opened a new studio in Mount Juliet which is about twenty miles east of Nashville.

²² Don Cusic, Professor of Music Business, Music Row Professor of Music Industry History, Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee. Phone interview with author, 31 July 2012.

²³ Kossler, 154. Studio A was a big room built alongside the Quonset Hut when the larger complex was constructed.

²⁴ Kossler, 154-57.

²⁵ Cusic, email communication with author, 27 August 2012.

²⁶ Cusic, phone interview with author, 31 July 2012.

²⁷ Kossler, 14.

Music Square East) to premises on 18th Ave South.²⁸ The 34 Music Square East complex, including the Quonset Hut, remained vacant for some time and was threatened with demolition but in 2005, it was purchased by the foundation belonging to the music businessman Mike Curb.²⁹ Around four years later, the Quonset Hut was refurbished for use as a modern working studio and as a classroom for Belmont University's Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business.³⁰

Sources: Published Sources and Reports

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Collections, Repositories and Archives

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²⁸ Dick Spottswood, "Columbia Records," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 105-106; Cusic, phone interview with author, 31 July 2012.

²⁹ Ryan Underwood, "Curb's generosity nurtures music's next generations," *The Tennessean*, 26 November 2006. Accessed via http://www.mikecurb.com/articles/Tennessean-MikeCurb_11-26-06a.pdf, 31 July 2012.

³⁰ Cooper.

Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library: Clippings files.

Historian: Rachel Hopkin, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2012

Project Information: Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of the Quonset Hut was undertaken as part of the 2012 HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by HABS and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) to allow a graduate student to work on a HABS history project. Rachel Hopkin (Western Kentucky University), 2012 Fellow, produced historical reports for several buildings related to the development of Nashville's music industry. HABS is within the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service (Catherine Lavoie, Chief, HABS; Richard O'Connor, Chief, HDP). Project planning was coordinated by Lisa P. Davidson, HABS historian and Chair, HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship Committee. Assistance was provided by Tim Walker, Executive Director, Nashville Metropolitan Historical Commission, and by Robbie Jones, Historic Nashville Inc. In addition, the assistance of Don Cusic (Professor of Music Business and Music Row Professor of Music Industry History, Belmont University), John Rumble (Senior Historian, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum) and Robert Oermann (journalist and writer) is gratefully acknowledged.



Figure 1: View of the rear of the complex at 34 Music Square East. The roof of the Quonset Hut is highlighted by an arrow and just visible in the center of the picture. Photograph by author, 18 July 2012.