

RCA STUDIO B
(RCA Victor Studio)
1611 Roy Acuff Place
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS TN-269
HABS TN-269

PHOTOGRAPHS
COLOR TRANSPARENCIES
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

RCA STUDIO B (RCA Victor Studio)

HABS No. TN-269

Location: 1611 Roy Acuff Place, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

The coordinates for this building are 36.149952 N, -86.792847 W and they were obtained through Bing maps (www.bing.com/maps/) on July 14, 2012. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Present Owner: Mike Curb Family Foundation

Present Use: Tourist attraction and recording studio

Significance: This one- and two-story concrete-block structure was built in 1957 on the southeast corner of 17th Ave South and Hawkins Street (later renamed Music Square West and Roy Acuff Place respectively) by Nashville businessman and real estate developer Dan Maddox. That same year RCA Records took out a long-term lease on the building and installed its recording equipment.¹ RCA already had studios in New York, Chicago, and Hollywood. Its new Nashville location was the first in that city to belong to a major label and was an indication of the company's interest and faith in the local emerging music industry.

The establishment of the new studio helped to consolidate the neighborhood in which it was located - later known as Music Row - as a fledgling music industry center. Under the leadership of the musician and producer Chet Atkins, who was based in the building between 1957 and 1973, RCA Studio B became closely associated with the so-called "Nashville Sound." The Nashville Sound was an approach to country music recording which developed in the mid-1950s and remained dominant for much of the following decade. Characteristics included pop-sounding singers, string and horn sections (instead of fiddle, banjo and steel guitar), and background choruses.²

Approximately 35,000 recording sessions took place at RCA Studio B, resulting in more than one thousand hit records.³ Significant musicians who used the studio include Elvis Presley, RCA country performers Jim Reeves, Eddy Arnold, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Dolly Parton, as well as non-RCA artists such as the Everly Brothers and Roy Orbison. Although it is primarily associated with country music, other genres were also recorded in Studio B.

¹ The studio became known as Studio B after RCA installed a larger studio in the building next door during the mid sixties.

² Bill Ivey, "The Nashville Sound," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 371-372.

³ Julie Robison, Tara Mitchell Mielnik, and John Rumble. *National Register of Historic Places – Nomination Form: RCA Studio B, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee* (United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 2012), 8.

RCA Studio B remained in operation until 1977. It is now owned by the Mike Curb Family Foundation and leased to the Country Music Hall of Fame[®] and Museum for \$1 a year. The Museum manages public tours and school programs at the studio. In addition, musicians still occasionally use the studio to record special projects. The Museum also makes the studio available as a learning laboratory to students in the recording program of Belmont University's Mike Curb College of Museum and Entertainment Business; at the studio, students learn to use and maintain both vintage analog equipment and newer digital equipment.

Historian: Rachel Hopkin, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2012

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1957
2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses:

OWNERS

- 1957-1993: Dan Maddox
1993-2002: Country Music Foundation Inc. (owner/operator of the Country Music Hall of Fame[®] and Museum)
2002-Present: Mike Curb Family Foundation

OCCUPANTS/USES

- 1957-1977: Used by RCA Victor as a recording studio.
1977-2002: Used by the Country Music Hall of Fame[®] and Museum as a tourist attraction and learning laboratory for the museum's school and public programs.
2002-Present: Leased by the Country Music Hall of Fame[®] and Museum for use as a tourist attraction and learning laboratory. Also used as a learning laboratory for students in the recording program of Belmont University's Mike Curb College of Music and Entertainment Business

4. Builder: Don Maddox

5. Original plans and construction: The original drawings have not been found. However, an ad for the new studio published in *Billboard* magazine on November 11, 1957, shows an artist's rendering of the north and west elevations of the building (Figure 1).⁴ This illustration indicates that when it was first erected, the structure consisted of the two-story area still occupied by Studio B, its control room and the echo chamber, and a one-story area to the west. There were several small windows on both the north and west facades of the one-story area. Two doorways are shown -- one on east end of the north façade that would have entered directly into the studio, and one on west end of the same façade. The door at the west end was reached via three steps, and

⁴ *Billboard* (11 November 1957), 122, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012).

the roof area over this doorway and the section into which it leads was slightly lower than that of the rest of the one-story section.

Based on physical and historical evidence, the greater part of the building remains in place. However, the overall form of the structure has been changed by an addition that runs the length the north façade.

6. Alterations and additions: In ca. 1960, a narrow one-story addition was built along the north side of the original building.⁵ This addition changed the overall form of the building and affected the placement of the entrances on the north façade. Originally there had been an entrance on the east end of the north façade which would have entered directly into the studio. A doorway exists within the now-interior wall at the same point. The other original entrance at the west end of the north façade has been replaced by one in a similar position within the addition. This entrance is now reached via an inset porch which is flush with the rest of the north façade and serves as the main point of entry for tour groups and other members of the public.

Within the building, the ca. 1960 addition houses a visitors' gallery, Studio D and its control room, and a small office. In 1973, a series of window openings adjacent to the main entrance on the western part of this addition were filled with concrete blocks. In 1996, the studio was renovated to facilitate its functioning as a tourist attraction. This included the installation of several observation windows within the building.

B. Historical Context:

In 1957, RCA Victor took out a long term lease on a concrete block structure newly built by local entrepreneur Dan Maddox on the southeast corner of 17th Ave South and Hawkins Street (now Music Square West and Roy Acuff Place, respectively). Company engineers proceeded to design and install their recording equipment. RCA Victor already had studios in New York, Chicago, and Hollywood, and its new Nashville location was the first in that city to belong to a major label. Over the ensuing two decades, this Nashville studio became one of America's most significant recording venues, with approximately 35,000 recording sessions taking place within its walls resulting in more than one thousand hit records.

RCA moved into its new premises at a relatively early stage in Nashville's emergence as a music industry center. Just twelve years previously, the city had had no commercial recording studios despite its being home to three radio stations - WLAC, WSIX and WSM - which all provided regular work for musicians. WSM was particularly notable in this regard because of its weekly broadcasts of the popular country music show the *Grand Ole Opry*. Before 1945, any commercial music recording taking place in the city had come about thanks to the scouting crews that ventured mainly from New York and Chicago to capture local talent. While Atlanta, Charlotte, Memphis, and New Orleans hosted many such "field" recording sessions, the Victor Talking Machine Company (predecessor to RCA Victor) was the only major label to visit Nashville prior to World War II. Victor spent a week recording Grand Ole Opry talent during the fall of 1928.⁶ Most country music sessions using Nashville-based artists were recorded either in New York or Chicago until after World War II.⁷

⁵ Robison, et al., 3.

⁶ Martin Hawkins, *A Shot in the Dark: Making Records in Nashville, 1945-55* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 2007), 14.

⁷ During the 1940s, a music professor at Fisk University called John Work III made a significant contribution to Nashville's non-commercial music recording industry when he began to document and record blues, gospel and

RCA Victor, in addition to being the first company to send a recording field unit to the city, was also responsible for the first modern commercial recording session in Nashville. It took place on December 4, 1944 and came about almost by accident. RCA had recently reached a resolution of a long-running dispute between major record labels and the American Federation of Musicians, which had led to the cessation of almost all recording activities during the previous two years. With the dispute newly settled, RCA had a backlog of sessions to record and its own studios were overbooked. Therefore, when it came to a proposed session with the Tennessee musician and *Opry* entertainer Eddy Arnold, Arnold was advised to make his own recordings locally and send the results to New York. Arnold accordingly arranged to cut four songs with his Tennessee Plowboys in WSM's Studio B in a session overseen by the RCA engineer Percy White and WSM engineers Aaron Shelton and Carl Jenkins.⁸

That session evidently helped the entrepreneurial Shelton and Jenkins to spot a gap in the market, for shortly after the Arnold/RCA recording they, along with their WSM engineering colleague George Reynolds, set up Nashville's first commercial studio service. The trio called the enterprise the Castle Recording Laboratory (drawing on WSM's nickname "Air Castle of the South"). They initially used a WSM studio, then moved to premises inside the Tulane Hotel (now demolished) on Church Street, and quickly began making recordings for all the major labels *except* RCA Victor. This was because RCA had an exclusive contract with the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians to provide engineers.⁹ Nonetheless, the success of the Castle venture was a key factor in the development of Nashville's commercial music business over the following decade, which in turn made the city an attractive location for the permanent RCA base just over a decade later. Castle recordings, many of them featuring *Grand Ole Opry* musicians, received national exposure and began to dominate *Billboard's* country music charts. Since many involved in the industry relied on this trade magazine, it afforded "tremendous visibility for the studio and for the Nashville music complex as a whole."¹⁰ Popular recording artists from other parts of the country made special trips to record in the city because of the increasing renown of its session musicians. This trend was so marked that by 1950 *Variety* was describing Nashville as a "small edition of New York's Tin Pan Alley" and reported that "not only have the major disk companies discovered that there's golden wax in these Tennessee hills, but the top pubberies are starting to prospect this area for likely pop tune material."¹¹ Three years later *Billboard* dubbed Nashville "the new Music City U.S.A."¹²

The success of Castle spurred the establishment of other local independent recording studios including Monogram Radio Productions (also known as the Brown Brothers studio), located above a cigar shop at 240 4th Ave. North, and a couple of similar enterprises set up by two musicians who had played on sessions at Castle - Harold and Owen Bradley.¹³ In 1955, the Bradleys launched their third attempt at a

string band music. Alan Lomax, who visited Fisk in the spring of 1941, arranged for the Library of Congress to assist Work in his efforts. See Hawkins, 14.

⁸ Hawkins, 15-16. The dispute was about the threat posed to live music performances by the use of recorded music on radio and in jukeboxes. The four songs that were recorded by Arnold during this session were released on RCA's Bluebird label.

⁹ John Rumble, "Castle Recording Studio," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385.

¹⁰ John Rumble, "The Emergence of Nashville as a Recording Center: Logbooks from the Castle Studio, 1952-53," *Journal of Country Music* 7, no. 3 (1978): 28.

¹¹ "Nashville area becoming a home base for scouting pop material," *Variety*, (25 October 1950): 43. A "pubberly" is a colloquial term used in the music business to describe a music publisher.

¹² "Nashville," *Billboard*, (3 October 1953): 45, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012).

¹³ Hawkins, 228.

studio when they purchased a house at 804 16th Ave South and installed their equipment within it.¹⁴ Their move to this neighborhood a mile or two southwest of Nashville's downtown marked the beginning of "Music Row" - a beginning that was consolidated two years later when RCA Victor Records took up residence in its new purpose-built studio nearby.

The Music Row neighborhood was originally built as a residential area.¹⁵ It is bounded by McGavock Street to the north, Music Square East (16th Avenue) on the east, Wedgewood Ave to the south, and 20th Ave South on the west.¹⁶ Many of the buildings in this area were originally constructed to accommodate wealthy residents prior to the turn of the twentieth century. 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."¹⁷ Doctors, college professors, architects and leading merchants and executives were among the early inhabitants. However, the area declined as the twentieth century progressed, with many of those living there being adversely affected by the Great Depression and World War II. By 1955, many of the formerly grand homes were in a state of some decay, the area was rezoned commercial and property was relatively cheap, thus allowing the Bradley brothers to build their new studio there and paving the way for other businesses such as RCA Victor to move in.¹⁸

RCA Victor had been building a presence in Nashville for some years prior to establishing its permanent local base. It had been conducting recordings sessions in the city since 1950 and had used a variety of different facilities set up with portable equipment. These included the aforementioned Brown Brothers' studio in downtown Nashville, a garage on 13th Ave North, and, from early 1955, a studio on McGavock Street, rented on a part-time basis from the Television, Radio and Film Commission of the Methodist Church.¹⁹ RCA's key personnel working in the city during this time were Stephen "Steve" Sholes and Chester "Chet" Atkins. Sholes was RCA's head of country and R&B recording and he travelled regularly to Nashville for sessions. In 1952, he hired Atkins, already signed to the label as a singer and musician, as his assistant. Neither liked the McGavock Street facilities and their work together helped convince RCA to establish a permanent facility in the city. The fact that it was willing to do so was an indication of the company's interest and faith in the city as a burgeoning music industry center.²⁰

The RCA Studio B building was constructed by Nashville entrepreneur Dan Maddox on the corner of the streets then known as 17th Avenue South and Hawkins Street (now Music Square West and Roy Acuff Place). RCA took out a long-term lease on the building and began installing recording equipment during the summer of 1957. A report in an August issue of *Billboard* announced that the studio itself had been designed by William Miltenberg, RCA's chief engineer and manager of recordings,

¹⁴ Michael Kosser, *How Nashville Became Music City, USA: Fifty Years of Music Row* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 11.

¹⁵ Kosser, ix.

¹⁶ John Lomax III, "The Center of Music City: Nashville's Music Row," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385.

¹⁷ Lomax III, 386.

¹⁸ Harold Bradley, interview by Douglas B Green, transcript, (17 January 1974), Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum; Lomax III, 386.

¹⁹ Hawkins, 230; "Victor to Open Nashville Studio," *Billboard*, (22 January 1955), 14, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012). The Elvis Presley hit record "Heartbreak Hotel" was recorded in the McGavock Street studio by RCA on January 10, 1956.

²⁰ Robison, et. al., 13.

and that it would open in October 1957.²¹ In October, the company sent another engineer, Les Chase, down from New York to help set up tape machines, a mixing board and other necessary equipment.²²

One of the important features of the new studio was its echo chamber. The use of echo chambers, which enabled the production of a reverb effect, was a new phenomenon in country music and the vogue for them is attributed in part to the popularity of Ferlin Husky's richly reverberant song "Gone." "Gone" had been recorded at the Bradley brothers' studio on 16th Ave South where a small makeshift space had been modified to serve as the echo chamber. The track became a hit in the spring of 1957.²³ Even before that, Steve Sholes had used a stairwell in the McGavock Street studio to create an echo effect with great success when overseeing the recording of Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel."²⁴ The new RCA studio was therefore built with an echo chamber in place on the second floor, above the control room. This small room was built with highly reflective walls made of plaster covered with shellac, and rigged with both speakers and microphones. This meant that during a recording session, a feed of an artist's voice or an instrument could be sent up to the speaker in the echo chamber. This reverberant, ambient sound would be captured on the microphones and then fed back to the mixing board and combined with the original "dry" signal on a delayed basis. The fraction-of-a-second delay created echo heard on the final mix. Eventually, engineers added German EMT echo devices in other portions of the building and used them in combination with the original echo chamber.²⁵

On November 11, 1957, the RCA Victor took out a full-page ad in *Billboard*, the text of which read as follows:

Brand New ---
and Beautiful

RCA VICTOR
Custom Record Sales
Recording Studio
Nashville, Tennessee

The South's finest recording facilities ... by RCA Victor, of course! This new studio housed in a building specially designed for it, puts at your disposal the most advanced, most complete recording equipment in the South. For the ultimate in recorded sound ... monaural or stereophone ... join today's top independent record manufacturers in specifying RCA Victor Custom quality for **your** records!²⁶

The ad includes an artist's rendering of the building in its original state. This illustration indicates that when first built, the structure consisted of the two-story area still occupied by Studio B, its control room and the echo chamber, and a one-story area to the west. There are several small windows on both the north and west facades of the one-story area. Two doorways are shown, one on east end of the north

²¹ "New Studio for Victor in Nashville," *Billboard*, (5 August 1957), 30, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012).

²² Robison, et al., 13.

²³ Robert Price, "Bakersfield Bonanza," *Journal of Country Music* 19, no.3 (1998): 32-35.

²⁴ Luke Gilfeather, Manager, RCA Studio B, personal communication with author, (13 September 2012).

²⁵ Interview with Bill Porter, conducted by John W. Rumble, Frist Library and Archive, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville. Bill Porter, who was the chief engineer at the studio between 1959 and 1963, is largely credited with fine-tuning the use of the echo chamber at Studio B. His development and skillful application of echo techniques help draw clients to the facility. See Robison, et. al.

²⁶ *Billboard*, (11 November 1957), 122, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012). The ellipses and the bold print are in the original ad.

façade that would have entered into the studio, and one on west end of the same façade. The door at the west end is reached via three steps, and the roof area over this doorway and the section into which it leads is slightly lower than that of the rest of the one-story section. A couple of weeks later, another ad in *Billboard* declared: "Our Open House Was a Huge Success Thanks, Everybody! RCA VICTOR Custom Record Sales Recording Studio."²⁷ On November 4, *Music Reporter* noted that the new RCA Victor recording studios were "already booking a heavy schedule of recording dates."²⁸

By the time the new building was open for business, Chet Atkins had been made head of RCA's country division and he based himself in RCA's new Nashville premises. Steve Sholes, meanwhile, had been promoted to RCA's head of Pop Singles as a reward for signing Elvis Presley to the label in 1955.²⁹ Presley himself would become one of the major artists to be associated with Studio B. The still extant Swivelier brushed aluminum light fixtures with different colored bulbs were installed at Presley's suggestion since he disliked the original fluorescent lighting.³⁰ Presley's first session in Studio B took place in 1958 while he was on leave from the army and ran overnight from June 10th into June 11th. The songs recorded were "I Need Your Love Tonight," "A Big Hunk O' Love," "Ain't That Loving You Baby," "(Now And Then There's) A Fool Such As I," and "I Got Stung."³¹ In the period between his first session in Studio B and his last, which took place exactly thirteen years later on June 10, 1971, Presley made more than 230 recordings in the building, including "It's Now or Never," "Are You Lonesome Tonight?," "Crying in the Chapel," and "Little Sister."

Aside from recording many hit records within its walls, Presley was also an important figure in the history of Studio B because the popularity of his musical style furthered a change in the Nashville distinctive approach to recording. The demand for Presley's records, and for rock & roll music more generally, contributed to a downturn in sales of country records during the late 1950s. In an effort to counteract this decline, Nashville producers and musicians applied this approach not only to youth-oriented rockers such as Presley, but also to hard-edged singers such as RCA's Porter Wagoner, who catered to country's core audience. The same producers and musicians also supported artists such as RCA's Eddy Arnold and Jim Reeves, Decca's Brenda Lee and Patsy Cline, Capitol's Sonny James, and Columbia's Marty Robbins, all of whom offered a new, pop-oriented country style dubbed the "Nashville Sound." This new style helped country music widen its popularity among adult listeners. The article in which that term first appeared was published in the *Music Reporter* magazine in 1958.³² Headlined "Nashville Booms as Music Mecca," it declared that Nashville:

...has become a shrine for label reps who come here from the big cities not only to use the large roster of talent assembled here, but also to get "that Nashville sound" which has proved so refreshingly different as compared with the stylized sound versions of the older music centers of the north, mid-west and west coast. ...The "Nashville sound" is reflected not only in the artists, but in the A&R men themselves, and proof of Nashville's music's saleability is seen in the increasing frequency with which Nashville-produced music has boomed to top chart positions in recent months.

²⁷ *Billboard*, (25 November 1957), 78, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012).

²⁸ "Charlie's Column," *Music Reporter*, (4 November 1957), 2.

²⁹ Hawkins, 231.

³⁰ Gilfeather, personal communication with author, (6 August 2012).

³¹ Ron Harman, Supervisor and Tour Guide, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, personal communication with author, (10 September 2012).

³² "Nashville Booms and Music Mecca," *Music Reporter* (17 November 1958): n.p..

The article also referred specifically to Chet Atkins at RCA, mentioning that he had “a score of hits to smile over.”

Atkins was of the key figures credited with developing the Nashville Sound (Owen Bradley, over on 16th Avenue South, was another) and since Atkins was based at RCA Studio B, the venue became closely associated with it. Atkins had produced Jim Reeve's crossover, Nashville Sound classic "Four Walls" at the Methodist Television, Radio, and Film Commission studio early in 1957. He scored another Nashville Sound hit with Don Gibson's "Oh Lonesome Me," which was recorded at Studio B on December 3, 1957, and began climbing the country and pop charts by early 1958.³³ Other Nashville Sound releases included Gibson's "I Can't Stop Loving You" (also recorded on December 3, 1957), the Browns' "The Three Bells" (recorded on June 1, 1959), Jim Reeves' "He'll Have to Go" (recorded October 15, 1959), Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" (recorded June 8, 1962), and Bobby Bare's "Detroit City" (recorded April 18, 1963).³⁴

The characteristics of the Nashville Sound included pop-leaning lead vocals, string and horn sections (instead of fiddle, banjo and steel guitar), and smooth background choruses.³⁵ Many typical Nashville Sound releases featured the same small band of session musicians who were collectively known as the A-team. The A-team included guitarists Grady Martin, Hank Garland, Ray Edenton and Harold Bradley (brother of Owen), pianists Floyd Cramer and Hargus "Pig" Robbins, bassist Bob Moore, drummer Buddy Harman, saxophonist Boots Randolph, and two principal vocal harmony groups - the Jordanares and the Anita Kerr Singers.³⁶

The Nashville Sound dominated country music during the late-1950s and through the 1960s and helped to broaden the appeal of the genre, with many typical releases becoming crossover pop hits. Thanks to its popularity, *Time* reported in 1960 that Nashville “had nosed out Hollywood as the nation’s second biggest (after New York) record producing center” and added that one out of every five of the previous year’s hit records had been recorded in the city.³⁷ The success of the Nashville Sound also had a tangible impact on the radio industry, helping country to establish itself more strongly on radio as television assumed the radio’s former role as the nation’s all-purpose variety entertainment medium and the radio industry segmented along the lines of musical style. In 1961, there were eighty-one full-time country radio stations; by 1972, there were more than six hundred.³⁸

With Chet Atkins in command at Studio B and riding the crest of the Nashville Sound wave, RCA expanded its successful Nashville operation around 1960. An addition was built to provide space for offices, equipment and another small studio and control room.³⁹ A few years later, RCA also took out a lease on an adjacent building and installed a larger studio within it which came to be known as Studio A.⁴⁰ At this point, the equipment in Studio B was also upgraded.

³³ Robison, et. al., 14.

³⁴ Harman, personal communication with author, (12 September 2012).

³⁵ Ivey, 371-372.

³⁶ Rich Kienzle, “Who You Gonna Call? The A Team,” in *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America*, eds. Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), 232.

³⁷ “Hoedown on a Harpsichord,” *Time* (14 November 1960): 52.

³⁸ Information panel, “Chet Atkins: Certified Guitar Player” exhibit, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, August 2011 - July 2012 (visited July 15, 2012).

³⁹ “RCA Custom Growing by Leaps and Bounds,” *Music Reporter* (23 June 1962), np.

⁴⁰ “RCA Victor’s New Nashville Studios are ‘Music’ City’s” Finest” [advertisement], *Billboard*, (3 April 1965), 27, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed September 13, 2012).

While numerous producers worked at Studio B, the building remains closely linked to Chet Atkins and his vision, and it was where he spent much of his working life between 1957 and 1973. His success is often attributed to his keen musical ear and appreciation for a wide range of musical styles. In addition, he strove to create a relaxed atmosphere and encouraged studio musicians to contribute their own musical ideas. Atkins also had a knack for discerning talent. Among the artists he signed to the RCA label were Dolly Parton, Charley Pride, Jerry Reed, Connie Smith, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings.⁴¹ The RCA executives were so pleased with his contributions that they made him a vice-president of the company in 1968.

However, Studio B was not used exclusively by RCA artists. It was also available for rent by other record companies. The man responsible for booking it out was Ed Hines, RCA Victor's custom representative in Nashville. In 1961, he said "every place I go people talk about RCA-Victor and the sound we get in Nashville. Everyone wants to come here for a session."⁴² That was not just hyperbole. The studio indeed became a sought-after venue. Among those labels that booked it were Cadence and Warner Brothers, which both used the place to record sessions with the Everly Brothers.⁴³ The Monument label did likewise with its biggest artist, Roy Orbison, and also recorded acts such as Grandpa Jones. The Challenge, Chart, Chess, Colonial, Deb, Dot, Hymn Time, Kapp, MGM, Old Town, Scarlet, Scope, 20th Century Fox and United Artists labels also rented RCA Studio B.⁴⁴

In 1973, Chet Atkins was diagnosed with cancer (he later recovered) and Atkin's assistant Jerry Bradley (son of Owen) took over RCA's Nashville office early the following year.⁴⁵ Perhaps the important album released during Bradley's years at the helm was the 1976 release *Wanted! The Outlaws* which featured music by Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Jessi Colter, and Tompall Glaser. This compilation was conceived and put together by Bradley using tracks available in RCA's back catalogue, many of which had been recorded in Studio B. It was the first country music album to gain platinum selling status and became emblematic of the so-called Outlaw movement that arose within country music during the 1970s. Those musicians associated with the movement professed a disdain for what they perceived to be the overly orchestrated Nashville Sound and the Nashville recording machine in general.⁴⁶

Early in 1977, after a lengthy dispute with the engineers' union, RCA announced it was shutting Studio B down as part of the label's broader effort to get out of the studio business. According to a *Billboard* report dating from January 15 of that year, the dispute concerned "more artistic and technical control demands by the creative side of the business." An RCA spokesperson stated, "We have not had the greater flexibility of operation needed to make continued use of our studios economically feasible."⁴⁷

⁴¹ Information panel, "Chet Atkins: Certified Guitar Player" exhibit, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, August 2011 - July 2012 (visited July 15, 2012).

⁴² "RCA Custom Sells Itself - Hines," *Music Reporter* (12 June 1961): 34. The article suggests that the resident engineer at that time, Bill Porter, might have been part of the reason why outside agencies were booking RCA's studios, although Porter himself attributed the success to the "ultra-modern multi-channel mixing console and monitoring" equipment as well as the "reverberation facilities."

⁴³ John W. Rumble, "Behind the Board: Talking with Studio Engineer Bill Porter," *Journal of Country Music* 18, no. 1 (1996): 27-40. The hit records that the Everly Brothers cut in the building included "All I Have to Do is Dream" and "Cathy's Clown."

⁴⁴ "RCA Custom Sells Itself - Hines," 34; "RCA Custom Growing by Leaps and Bounds," *Music Reporter* (23 June 1962), np.

⁴⁵ Kosser, 192.

⁴⁶ Stephen R Tucker, "Outlaws," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 397-398.

⁴⁷ "RCA folds Nashville, LA. Studios: N.Y. next?," *Billboard* (15 January 1977): 3, <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive> (accessed August 19, 2012).

Upon its closure, the Maddox family - which still owned the building - allowed the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum to use it for tours and school programs. In 1993, the Maddox Family Foundation donated the property to the Museum. Three years later, observation windows looking into Studio B and its control room were installed within the building in order to help facilitate public visits.

In 2002, the building was purchased by the Mike Curb Family Foundation, which went on to lease it back to the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum for \$1 a year. The public tours and school programs continue and musicians occasionally still use the studio to record special projects. Examples include the albums *Time (The Revelator)* made by Gillian Welch in 2002, and *Long Line of Heartaches* recorded by Connie Smith in 2011.⁴⁸

The neighborhood where RCA Studio B stands is today known as Music Row. It is home to offices of the world's major music recording and publishing companies, the nation's three performance rights organizations (ASCAP, BMI and SESAC), as well as many independent labels and studios, and other related businesses such as booking agencies, artist managers, video production companies and PR firms. The early and sustained success of RCA Studio B was major factor in the development of this neighborhood as an international commercial music center that remains particularly, but not exclusively, associated with country music.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: RCA Studio B is a one- and two-story concrete block building with a flat roof. The building has the simple, clean lines and asymmetrical form characteristic of mid-20th century Modernism. The two-story section of the building is the southeast quarter, which houses Studio B and its echo chamber. The one-story section is located at the north and west sides (Figures 2 and 3).
2. Condition of fabric: The building appears to be in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 84 feet by 48 feet
2. Foundations: Concrete slab on grade.
3. Walls: The walls are formed of concrete blocks painted a light beige color. In part of the wall next to the main entrance on the north façade (which is adjacent to Roy Acuff Place), there is an area in which the blocks have been arranged in such a way as to create a checkered effect. Around the corner on the northern half of the west façade (adjacent to Music Square West) further ornamentation has been achieved through the use of blocks molded with a relief pattern that includes a diamond form. This area of relief-patterned blocks is punctuated by two oblong sections that consist of three by six perforated decorative blocks. Affixed to the north façade of the second floor there is a large red sign with raised white lettering that reads "RCA Victor Studio."
4. Structural system, framing: RCA Studio B has load-bearing concrete block walls and a flat roof supported by a Pratt top chord truss.

⁴⁸ Robison, et. al., 22.

5. Porches, balconies: On the west end of the north façade, there is an inset concrete porch that leads to the main entrance of the building. The porch entrance is sheltered by a section of overhanging eave. There are three steps that lead from the street level to the entrance level, which are formed of exposed aggregate concrete. On the west side of these steps there is a black-painted metal handrail. Part of the west wall of the porch consists of an oblong section of three-by-six perforated decorative blocks that also forms part of the west façade.

In addition, there is a small flat porch roof with diagonal bracing (probably added later) above a doorway on the north end of the east elevation. There is one very small utilitarian metal balcony on the second floor of the south elevation onto which a doorway opens.

6. Chimneys: N/A

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance is at the west end of the north façade. It is recessed and accessed via an inset porch. The entrance is a metal and glass construction with a door placed between two side lights. There is also a very narrow transom above the door.

There are two utilitarian hollow metal doors on the south elevation. One is reached by a short flight of five concrete block steps. The other is at the second floor level and opens out onto a small metal balcony from which a metal ladder affixed to the wall can be reached. On the north end of the east elevation, which is adjacent to a parking lot, there is another door. It is metal and glass with a side light to the left.

- b. Windows and shutters: None

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roofs of both the one- and two-story parts of the building are flat and are supported by Pratt top chord trusses.⁴⁹ The roof covering is rubber membrane with ballasts. The roof is lower above northwest corner and across the west elevation than the rest of the one-story part of the building.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The roof and wall edge meet at metal coping and a low strip of metal mesh (to keep internal gutters clear). The lower roof section over the main entrance and west elevation projects to create a wide cantilevered eave with a plain soffit.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans (See Figure 4 and 5): From the main entrance, one enters a small lobby then a gallery with photos of artists who have recorded songs with the studio. Continuing east there is a small office, a small control room for Studio D, Studio D itself and another small room which is used as a gathering place for tour groups as they prepare to exit the building. All of these rooms are housed within the ca. 1960 addition to the building.

The main room on the first floor is Studio B itself which takes up over a quarter of the total first floor space and - because of its a high ceiling - most of the second story as well. It is

⁴⁹ Gilfeather, personal communication with author, (10 September 2012).

situated in the southeast part of the building. Adjacent to it is the Studio B control room and further to the west are a lounge area and two rest rooms. The second story, in addition to encompassing the high ceiling of Studio B, also contains the studio's echo chamber.

2. Stairways: There are no internal stairways. Access to the second floor echo chamber is via an external metal wall ladder on the south elevation.
3. Flooring: Twelve-inch square linoleum tiles are used throughout the ground floor. They are yellow and grey/brown, flecked with white, and have been arranged in a diagonal checkerboard fashion. This flooring covers both linoleum placed there in the 1960s as well as the original ten-inch square linoleum and asbestos tiles.⁵⁰
4. Wall and ceiling finish: A variety of different wall finishes are used throughout the building, including acoustic panels and rustic wood paneling, painted drywall, and painted concrete blocks. Within Studio B itself, acoustic Owens Corning 703 panels with a fabric face are used on the walls of three sides of the room and form a zigzag pattern that changes direction every four feet. The purpose behind this design was to capture sound waves and make the room sound as dead as possible. Below this zigzag section, carpet has been affixed to the wall to the height of three feet. The carpet was added during a ca. 1990 renovation of the studio. Previously pegboard over low-density fiberglass had been used.⁵¹ In Studio D and the Studio D control room, the walls undulate in a curving manner thanks to the use of custom molded plastic panels over high density fiberglass. Hollow wood diffusers are also in place in that area. Ceilings are formed of acoustic drop tiles throughout, with the exception of the second floor echo chamber where both the ceiling and the walls consist of plaster covered with shellac.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and Doors: The doorways typically have simple wood frames and one or two-leaf solid or hollow core wood doors. The doors that open into the studio are extra thick for sound proofing purposes.
 - b. Windows: No windows open onto the exterior. There are a number of internal double paned windows including those between Studio B and its control room which act as viewing galleries for tourists.
6. Decorative features and trim: None noted.
7. Hardware: Hardware throughout consist of simple utilitarian metal handles and hinges.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The building mostly uses a forced air HVAC system fed by a gas furnace. Wall fans perforate the walls in a number of areas. The lounge area and the office are heated via hot air heat pumps.
 - b. Lighting: A variety of light fixtures are used throughout the building, including rectangular fluorescent panels, overhead track lighting with spotlights encapsulated by

⁵⁰ Robison, et. al., 3.

⁵¹ Gilfeather, personal communication with author, (6 August 2012).

either white plastic or metal fixtures, and overhead cone-shaped metal light fixtures. In Studio B itself, brushed aluminum bullet lights, made by the Swivelier Company of New York City, are suspended from the ceiling in groups of four, with different color bulbs (red, blue, green and white) in each of the four lights. Originally, there had been three rows of fluorescent strip-lighting in the ceiling but these were replaced by the Swivelier lights and the colored bulbs on the suggestion of Elvis Presley.⁵²

c. Plumbing: RCA Studio B was built with plumbing for bathroom use. There are two bathrooms adjacent to the lounge area with simple modern white fixtures.

d. Miscellaneous: In the control room to Studio B there is a twenty-four track mixing console which was installed in 2003, as well as a variety of other recording equipment.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: Design and construction drawings for RCA Studio B have not been located.

B. Early Views: An artist's rendering of the RCA Studio B was published as part of an advertisement for the new building on November 11, 1957 in *Billboard* and can be accessed via that publication's online archive at <http://www.billboard.com/#/archive>

C. Interviews:

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⁵² Gilfeather, personal communication with author, August 6, 2012.

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Collections, Repositories and Archives

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE:

Davidson County Register of Deeds: Property deeds.

Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum: Clippings files and journal archives.

Metro Historical Commission: National Register of Historic Places nomination documents and clippings files.

Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library: Clippings files.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of RCA Studio B 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), Ron Harmon (Supervisor and Tour Guide, Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum, Luke Gilfeather (RCA Studio B Manager, Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum), John Rumble (Senior Historian, Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum) and Robert Oermann (journalist and writer) is gratefully acknowledged.

PART V. ILLUSTRATIONS:

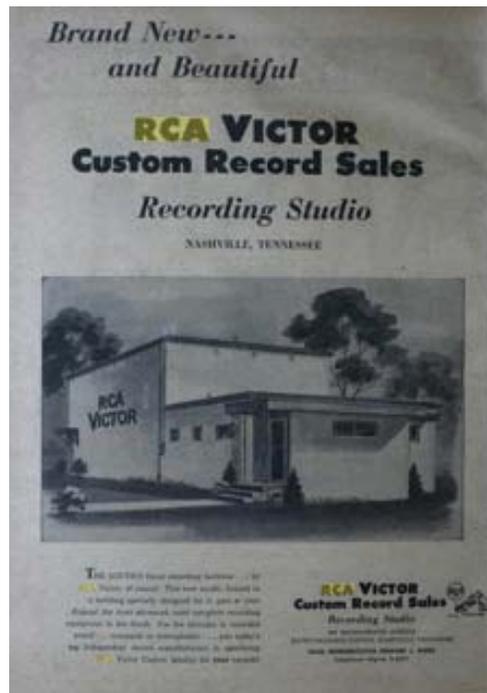


Figure 1: Advertisement for the new Nashville RCA Victor Studio.
Source: *Billboard*, (11 November 1957).



Figure 2: The north and east facades of RCA Studio B.
Source: Photograph courtesy of Luke Gilfeather, 14 September 2012.



Figure 3: The north and west facades of RCA Studio B.
Source: Photograph courtesy of Lisa P. Davidson, 18 July 2012.



Figure 4: Interior of RCA Studio B.
Source: Photograph by author, 18 July 2012.

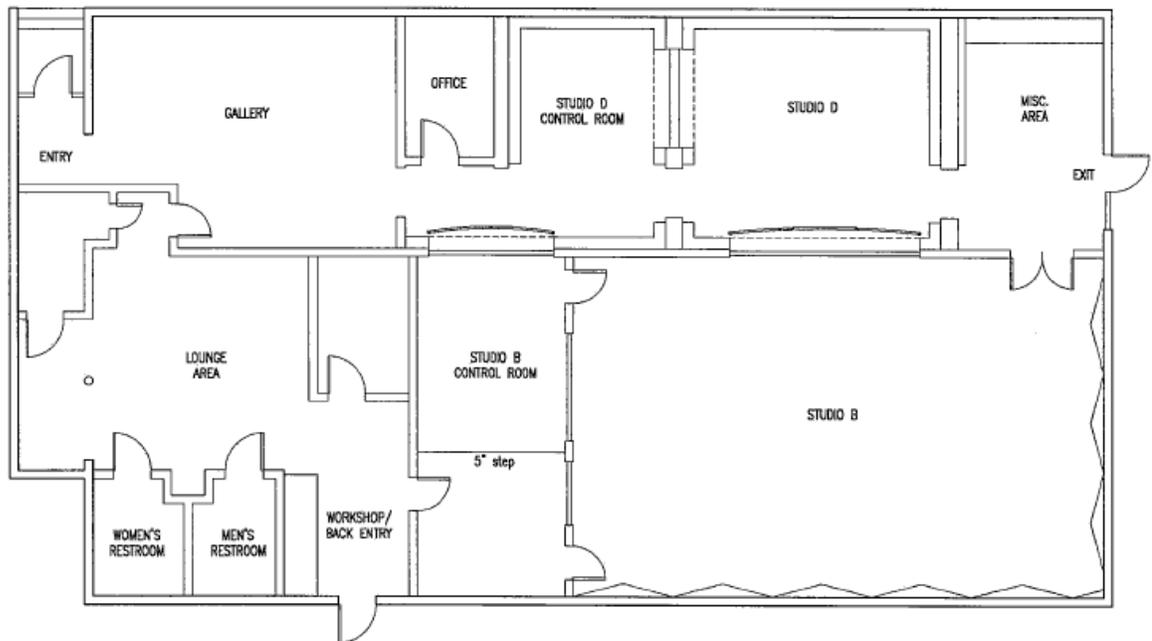


Figure 5: Current floor plan of RCA Studio B from site survey.
Source: Robinson et. al., National Register Nomination - Studio B, drawing by Julie Robinson, (2011).