

Don't Lose Your Good Thing: The Preservation, Interpretation, and Community
Engagement of Historic Recorded Music Spaces

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
List of Figures	iv
Chapter 1. Introduction: Don't Lose Your Good Thing	1
Chapter 2. Treated Wrong Blues: The Starr Piano / Gennett Records Property in Richmond, Indiana, 1890 - 1976	30
Chapter 3. The Waltz You Saved for Me: The Preservation of Starr Valley, 1976 - 2022	63
Chapter 4. I Am Resolved: The Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol, Tennessee / Virginia, 1971 - 2014	128
Chapter 5. Pick Up the Pieces: The Campaign to Rebuild, Revive, and Revitalize the Stax Records Building and Soulsville Neighborhood, 1989 - 2003	176

Chapter 6. Blues Stay Away from Me: The Rise and Fall of King Records, 1943 - 1972	227
Chapter 7. Get Up, Get into It, Get Involved: The Political and Community Campaign to Save the King Records Buildings, 1980 - 2022	267
Chapter 8. Conclusion: No More Right Place, Wrong Time	325
Bibliography	333

ABSTRACT

Recorded music transcends being more than mere entertainment and the places of its creation are historically significant deserving of preservation attention and interpretation. While there are federal and well-funded efforts to preserve the sound recordings, no such effort exists for the places of its production. As a result, many sites have been demolished, left to deteriorate, or repurposed into something that does not respect its historic significance and integrity.

While recorded music historical sites serve to preserve and interpret the history of American popular culture, within its four walls lies a deeper history that weaves into the fabric of American social, racial, political, and economic past. Additionally, these sites present an opportunity to engage its community and to serve as a place to both educate and inspire the populace of today and tomorrow.

I will explore the preservation history of some of these sites, particularly in the American South and Midwest, and detail the history of the successes and failures to preserve them. Four sites, Starr-Gennett (Richmond, Indiana), the Birthplace of Country Music Museum (Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia), the Stax Museum of American Soul (Memphis, Tennessee), and King Records (Cincinnati, Ohio) serve as case studies not only of how to preserve and interpret these sites, but also how to engage the local community in arts and historical education.

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LIST OF FIGURES

1. RCA Studio A open house	1
2. 1909 postcard of Starr Valley	30
3. Interpretive marker at site of Gennett recording studio	63
4. “Birthplace of Country Music” mural	128
5. Birthplace of Country Music Museum	128
6. Stax Museum of American Soul	176
7. “I Love Soulsville” mural	176
8. King Records and Studio building	227
9. Interior of King Records	267
10. Starday-King Records building	325

- Chapter 1 -

Introduction: Don't Lose Your Good Thing



Image: RCA Studio A open house sign (Nashville, Tennessee), photo by author.

If you keep on playin' around
 You gonna lose me, oh baby
 Don't lose your good thing now
 Now listen, you better wake up
 You better settle down, don't lose it
 Don't lose your good thing now...
 Someday you just might need me
 And I won't be around
 Ooh, oh darling, oh baby
 Don't lose your good thing now
 Jimmy Hughes, "Don't Lose Your Good Thing," 1967.¹

In June 2014, Ben Folds, a critically acclaimed pianist, songwriter, and recording artist, took to social media to announce his eviction from RCA Studio A on Music Row in Nashville. He had rented the RCA Studio A recording space for several years to write and record music. Heirs to the estates of Owen Bradley and Chet Atkins sold the building to developers who planned to tear it down and build condominiums. In his open letter posted on Facebook, Folds noted, "While we Nashvillians can feel proud about the overall economic progress and prosperity we're enjoying, we know it's not always so kind to historical spaces, or to the legacy and foundation upon which that prosperity was built."² At the time, Folds' observation could have been cut and pasted into similar

¹ Jimmy Hughes, "Don't Lose Your Good Thing," by Rick Hall, Spooner Oldham, and Bob Killen, released June 1967, FAME 45-1014, 45 rpm. Both Etta James (in 1968 for Chess Records) and Jimmy Hughes (in 1967 for FAME Records) recorded "Don't Lose Your Good Thing," written by Rick Hall, Robert Earl Killen, and Spooner Oldham, at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

² Adam Gold, "Ben Folds May Be Forced to Vacate RCA Studio A, Pens Open Letter to Nashville," *Nashville Scene*, June 24, 2014, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/music/article/1305443/ben-fold-may-be-forced-to-vacate-rca-studio-a-pens-open-letter-to-nashville>.

situations across the country including in Cincinnati, Muscle Shoals, Macon, Grafton, Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, Atlanta and dozens of others. He further articulated his sentiment as a musician to why historic recording spaces demanded immediate intervention. In the same open letter, Folds offered the following historic preservation argument.

I only want to make music in this historic space [RCA Studio A], and allow others to do the same. I've recorded all over the world and I can say emphatically that there's no recording space like it anywhere on the planet. These studio walls were born to ring with music. I just wanted to keep it alive . . . Historic RCA Studio A is too much a part of why such incredible business opportunities exist in 2014 in Nashville to simply disappear. Music City was built on the foundation of ideas, and of music. What will the Nashville of tomorrow look like if we continue to tear out the heart of the Music Row that made us who we are as a city? Ultimately, who will want to build new condos in an area that has no central community of ideas or creative? . . . I believe that progress and heritage can co-exist in mutual respect.³

With those words began an international campaign largely on social media calling for the preservation of RCA Studio A.

While the passion and fervor became viral, missing was the money to purchase the building and preserve it. Also missing was any sort of central or organized body that possessed the expertise, finances, and ability to intercede. Especially absent from this call for intervention were the city, state, and federal governments, who are often quick to step in for sites tied to a Civil War battle or figure, but rarely, if ever, when it relates to the significant social, cultural, or artistic past. Today is a critical time to save these spaces, as the nature of modern sound recording has changed significantly in the last two

³ Ibid.

decades. With the advent of digital audio workstations, such as ProTools, the recording process became decentralized and no longer emphasized working in dedicated studio facilities, like RCA Studio A. Rather, many artists create their sound recordings in home studios. While there are solid economic rationales for an artist to invest their recording advances into home studio construction, the historical business model still presents economic and cultural value to both creators and citizens. Without intervention, these recording studios may be lost forever.

Before Folds' startling announcement in 2014, former drummer in Nirvana and two-time Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters, produced both a documentary about a historic studio in Los Angeles, *Sound City*, in 2013 and a series on HBO, *Sonic Highways*, in 2014. Grohl situated the importance of place not only in the hands of the creators of music, but the audience. In the first episode of *Sonic Highways*, Grohl insisted that, "The environment in which you make a recording ultimately influences the end result...not just the studio, but the people and the history." He further argued, "If everyone knew more about the people and places this music is made, they would feel more connected to it."⁴ Grohl's use of mass media and Fold's use of social media underscores the effects of using popular media to further the cause made by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko in the foreword to *Guide to Making Public History*: "I'm convinced that we can ignite in our audience a deeper connection to history by infiltrating pop culture. I've been thinking about the intersection of social media, Hollywood,

⁴ *Sonic Highways*, directed by Dave Grohl (Rule 34, LLC, 2014), DVD (Sony Music Enterprises, 2015), episode 1.

networking, and history.”⁵ There are other artists who have begun to take up the cause of historic preservation, such as Jack White and Dr. Dre, but sadly and, not surprisingly, very few music businesses, including the major record companies, have yet to join the effort.

The history of popular and vernacular music is tied mostly to the historical biography of its artists, eras, and professionals and to the distribution and preservation of its product, the sound recording. Lost in the historic collective whole is any sort of organized action towards the place of its creation and dissemination.

The federal government developed and funded an annual designation for dozens of sound recordings of historical and cultural significance for permanent preservation through the National Recording Preservation Act of 2000.⁶ This act created the National Recording Registry program through the Library of Congress. However, there is no national and coordinated effort to preserve the sites where the musicians crafted these sound recordings. This omission leads to a disconnect in the minds of the public and policy makers between the product and the place of its creation. This separation continues to manifest at several sites threatened with demolition and redevelopment, including, most recently, King Records in Cincinnati, Ohio; Capricorn Records in Macon, Georgia; Electric Ladyland and the Magic Shop Studios in New York City, New York; J&M Studios and the Sea Saint Studio in New Orleans, Louisiana; King-Starday Records in

⁵ Cinnamon Caitlin-Legutko, “Introduction,” Bob Beatty, ed., *Guide to Making Public History* (Lanham, MD: The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2017), xii.

⁶ “About This Program,” Library of Congress, accessed July 2, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-plan/about-this-program/>

Madison, Tennessee; and RCA Studio A along with several other buildings on Music Row in Nashville, Tennessee. Without a federal program and guidance, efforts to save these buildings falls on local citizens, passionate advocates, and, hopefully, wealthy benefactors. While the National Register of Historic Places, a part of the National Preservation Act of 1966, offers some tax and financial advantages in addition to status, the program oft-times requires the property owner to initiate and approve of the application with no funding or advocacy for the inclusion of these spaces. But it does not guide, educate, empower, or finance the local initiative or, at the least, advocate on its behalf.

The ideal preservation goal for properties associated with recorded music history lie in keeping the facility operational and involved in commerce. These facilities possess unique sonic characteristics that neither new buildings nor electronic trickery can replicate. Additionally, musicians often spiritually connect to places and its past as sources of inspiration; a way to connect to their musical heritage and influence. Despite the home studio explosion, musicians continue to record in historic studios such as Sun Studio in Memphis, Tennessee; RCA Studios A and B in Nashville, Tennessee; and FAME Studio and Muscle Shoals Recording Studio in the Muscle Shoals area in Alabama. All of the above studios reside on the National Register of Historic Places after a local and owner-driven effort. RCA Studio A in Nashville, which recently faced the wrecking ball in favor of condominiums was saved only after an international and star-studded outcry led to a last minute and zero-hour intervention and purchase by three

wealthy benefactors, Aubrey Preston, Mike Curb, and Chuck Elcan. Despite the collective agreement that RCA Studio A deserved preservation protections, that was not what caused its preservation, it was the private financing. The new owners vowed to both preserve the historic integrity of the studio and to keep it fully operational. Dave Cobb, a multi-platinum and Grammy nominated producer of hit albums by Chris Stapleton and Jason Isbell, became the producer in residence at RCA Studio A in 2016. He stated, “My plan is simple: Honor the history of Studio A while making sure its unique sound carries forward onto new songs and albums with new artists.”⁷ He has since produced Grammy-award winning, chart topping, and critically acclaimed records by Jason Isbell, Dolly Parton, the Oak Ridge Boys, Barry Gibb, Chris Stapleton, and Brandi Carlile in RCA Studio A. *Mix* magazine perfectly encapsulated the productive marriage of David Cobb and the historic recording space. “Cobb is a musician’s producer, embodying a participatory production style that would feel familiar and comfortable to the musical ghosts in RCA Studio A.”⁸ While preservationists can take a breather from the near loss of the RCA Studio A space, other places without wealthy and politically connected benefactors languish in the wind or are on a longer than necessary road towards the ultimate goal of proper preservation and interpretation.

⁷ Jessica Nicholson, “Producer Dave Cobb To Take Over Music Row’s Historic RCA Studio A,” *Music Row*, January 15, 2016, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.musicrow.com/2016/01/producer-dave-cobb-to-take-over-music-rows-historic-rca-studio-a/print/>.

⁸ Frank Wells, “Dave Cobb Settles in to RCA A,” *Mix Online*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.mixononline.com/recording/profiles/dave-cobb-settles-in-to-rca-studio-a>, accessed November 23, 2021.

Open Letter to A Landlord

Now you can tear a building down
 But you can't erase a memory
 These houses may look all run down
 But they have a value you can't see. . .
 Living Colour, "Open Letter (To a Landlord)," 1989.⁹

When the opportunity to maintain the studio as a working facility is neither financially possible nor practical, efforts to repurpose the space under National Register of Historic Places guidelines or other interpretive commemorative efforts become the priority. When the building no longer possesses the viability to continue as a studio, a major disconnect occurs in the public's perception of the structure's historical value. There is a disassociation between the recording and the place of its creation. If the recordings remain available on compact disc, vinyl records, streaming services, YouTube videos, and / or download stores, why must there be an investment in preserving the place of its creation? If the audience can read about the artist or professional's history in a book or a website such as *Wikipedia*, why do they need to visit the place of their work? George Lipsitz addresses this disconnect between the actual recordings and the historical importance of the place of their creation in his book *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*:

The presence of sedimented historical currents within popular culture illuminates the paradoxical relationship between history and commercialized leisure. Time,

⁹ Living Colour, "Open Letter (To a Landlord)," written by Vernon Reid and Tracie Morris, released in 1989, Epic LCL-4, 45 rpm.

history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection. This capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present. History and commercialized leisure appear to be polar opposites — the former concerned with continuities that unite the totality of human experience, the latter with immediate sense gratifications that divide society into atomized consumers...Both developed in the nineteenth century in response to extraordinary technological and social changes.¹⁰

The public revels in places where famous speeches or famous speakers appeared and thus seek to preserve and connect with that moment in time. By knowing the exact spot where Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., or George Washington spoke their immortal words, the public binds the past to the present. A full and relevant history of Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" does not lie solely in the duplication of the words from the speech and a handful of biographies. Its full historical perspective includes the real estate, the Gettysburg battlefield and the Soldier's National Cemetery, upon which he gave this oration. However, when someone records a speech or music, then reproduces and distributes it on a mass scale, the reenactment and connection occurs through the listening in one's personal space. It disconnects the recording from the importance of the place. The product, the result, remains present, so why does the place of its production also need preservation?

¹⁰ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5.

The movement to preserve places of recorded music history began in earnest fairly recently, thus the amount of academic, economic, and cultural advocacy is currently in its infancy. This scholarship expanded the cultural significance of sound recordings from one of entertainment, leisure, and economic and entrepreneurial success to the inclusion of its social and cultural significance. The expansion reaches past the typical music fan and situates sound recordings and its creators into the fabric of traditional history studies. Additionally, some recent scholars and advocates published either property histories or historic preservation essays. This scholarship expands upon arguments for the historic place of sound recordings and develops a stronger argument for the preservation and interpretation of these properties currently under threat.

Walter N. Bone's 2004 essay "Memphis Approves a Museum and Music Academy to Preserve Its Culture, Arts, and History" was one of the earliest efforts to cite historical music sites as a subject for urban renewal. It appeared in a collection entitled *Cities and the Arts: A Handbook for Renewal*, which largely discusses the concept of the "Creative Class" and cultural heritage strategies for urban revitalization. The collection of essays, including Bone's, presented case studies where various municipalities invested in cultural resources such as theaters, art centers, and incentives for the 'creative class strategy' to revive faltering sections of a city. Bone's three-page essay only lightly scratches the surface of Stax Records' cultural and historical significance and briefly describes the then recently opened Stax Museum of American Soul and the Stax Music

Academy.¹¹ In Chapter Five, “Pick Up the Pieces: The Campaign to Rebuild, Revive, and Revitalize the Stax Records Building and Soulsville Neighborhood, 1989 - 2003,” I expand upon his essay and recount the various attempts to preserve and commemorate Stax in Memphis. The chapter also details the eventual successful campaign that led to the building of the two institutions, and the recent efforts by the citizens of Soulsville, formerly known as South Memphis, to use its cultural assets to further community pride and attract tourism.

In May 2017, *the Public Historian* published Charles Lester’s “They’ve Taken It All Away. The Only Thing Here Is Me: The Struggle to Preserve the Legacy of King Records.” Lester detailed the effort to save the King Records buildings from the 1997 visit by James Brown through the 2017 intervention by the Cincinnati City Council and Mayor John Cranley to boldly approve the use of eminent domain to acquire the building. While Lester admirably recounted the efforts to save the King buildings from the wrecking ball, he obviously did not cover the events of 2017 and 2018 where the city successfully acquired the buildings from Dynamic Industries and began the campaign to rebuild and contextualize the site.¹² In Chapters Six and Seven, “Get Up, Get into It, Get Involved: The Political and Community Campaign to Save the King Records Buildings (Evanston, Cincinnati, Ohio),” I correct many of Lester’s gaps in the effort to save the

¹¹ Walter N. Bone, “Memphis Approves a Museum and Music Academy to Preserve Its Culture, Arts, and History, Roger L. Kemp, ed., *Cities and the Arts: A Handbook for Renewal* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004).

¹² Charles Lester, “They’ve Taken It All Away. The Only Thing Here Is Me: The Struggle to Preserve the Legacy of King Records,” *The Public Historian* 39, no. 2 (2017): 58–81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26420988>.

King buildings and corrects some of his misinterpretations of the events he explored. For example, Lester's start date for the effort to preserve the King site starts with James Brown's 1997 visit. The effort truly began in the early 1970s, adjacent to the sale of the King buildings upon its closure, when the Evanston Community Council campaigned against the construction of Interstate 71 bisecting its community. While they ultimately failed, the campaign led highway planners to spare the King buildings. Brewster Avenue now ends at the last King building, the remaining portion of the street became an on ramp. Other campaigns to save or at least acknowledge the King buildings continued throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s prior to Lester's essay. These efforts succeeded in keeping the King Records legacy flame alive and a part of any discussion by future preservationists. To dismiss or ignore their efforts is akin to failing to acknowledge a recording artist or songwriter's influences. Neither emerge from thin air and without connections to the past.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation named Sheryl Davis to its "40 under 40: People Saving Places" list in 2018. Davis, along with her twin sister Sherry, have dedicated their careers to the preservation, advocacy, and outreach for sites of music history. Sheryl maintains a blog entitled "RE: Muse-icology."

Sheryl's work focuses on her passion for bringing greater recognition to the underrepresented places that tell the story of early rock 'n' roll and its roots. Her relationships with communities center on the importance of how the individual's personal life experiences, emotional attachments to place and associated feelings of musical and environmental nostalgia motivate and sustain the relevancy and survival of rock 'n' roll heritage sites.¹³

¹³ "About," Sheryl Davis, MAHP, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.sheryldavis.org/about>.

In 2015, Routledge Press published her essay “Re: Muse-icology: Defining a National Landscape for the Study and Preservation of Rock’n’roll’s Built Heritage in America,” as part of a collection entitled *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-it-Yourself, Do-it-Together*. The essay details her effort to survey the built environment remaining in the United States and argues for increased efforts to preserve the remaining structures using a synthesis of “musicology, architectural history, and phenomenology.”¹⁴ This confluence of strategies, she argues, betters both the ability to identify sites of historical and cultural significance and to argue for preservation intervention. While largely focusing on her study and her career, she articulates some salient methodologies for historic preservation efforts for all types of properties associated with music heritage, not just the recorded music sites.

In 2022, Davis launched the American Musical Landmarks Project (AMLP). AMLP’s mission is, “to generate public awareness and stewardship of currently existing buildings where US popular music history was incubated, created, performed and commercialized,” including “artist homes, recording studios, and performance venues that range from largely unknown and endangered properties to successfully preserved and operating historic sites.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Sheryl Davis, “Re: Muse-icology: Defining a National Landscape for the Study and Preservation of Rock’n’roll’s Built Heritage in America,” in *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-it-Yourself, Do-it-Together*, ed. Sarah Baker (New York: Routledge, 2015), 216

¹⁵ “About,” American Music Landmarks Project, website, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.musiclandmarks.org/about>.

In addition to the above, literature on preservation efforts remains sparse compared to the many histories of record labels and recording artists. The overall focus still lies in the people and products produced. Important studies that contain some property history include Robert Gordon's *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*; Robert Bowman's *Soulsville, USA: The Story of Stax Records*; Jon Hartley Fox's *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*; Rick Kennedy's *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots*; and Alex van der Tuuk's *Paramount's Rise and Fall: A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and Its Recording Activities*. While I attempted with my coauthor, Linda Gennett Imscher, to include the story of efforts to preserve and interpret the Starr Valley buildings and site in our book, *Images of America: Gennett Records and Starr Piano*, the limitation of the format and space did not allow for either a complete and detailed history or a historical argument. However, that story still appears in the book on equal footing to the people and products in Starr-Gennett's history. Chapters Two and Three, "Treated Wrong Blues: The Starr Piano - Gennett Records Site History in Richmond, Indiana" explores the details of the successes and failures to save the buildings and subsequent preservation and interpretation efforts.

Other books that detail record label histories make a brief mention of the recording buildings in an epilogue, including Nadine Cohodas' *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*; John A. Jackson's *House on Fire: The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul*; Carla Jean Whitley's *Muscle Shoals Sound*

Studio: How the Swampers Changed American Music; Blake Ells' *The Muscle Shoals Legacy of Fame*; and Gerald Posner's *Motown: Music, Money, and Power*. But most prevalent in label history texts is the complete disconnect or abandonment of the narrative about the building and recording studios in which the history took place from the people and sound recordings.¹⁶

A more social and cultural history context for music studies has provided valuable fodder for historic preservation arguments. Early popular and vernacular music history works uncovered and contextualized many of the source material and narratives to which future efforts based their work and argue with their conclusions. However, most of these works focused solely on the narrative histories of music and the musicians as an isolated occurrence. This focus began to turn in 1973, when Eileen Southern called for an expansion of scholarship and historical research in African American music. She challenged the next generation of popular and vernacular music scholars to follow the lead she established in her 1971 book, *The Music of Black Americans*. It was time to expand the work beyond the narrow-focused narratives of the artists and the repertoire found in the important but limited efforts of musicologists and early blues and jazz historians, amongst them Samuel Charters' *The Country Blues*, Paul Oliver's *The Story of the Blues*, and Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*. Southern presented the following argument.

¹⁶ Some examples include Nathan D. Gibson's *The Starday Story: The House that Country Music Built*; Rohen Jones' *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*; Richard Cook's *Blue Note Records: The Biography*; and Nelson George's *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*.

A few other admonitions are in order for would-be researchers in Afro-American music. While the musical document is of great importance, or equal significance is its cultural and historical function. The musical score can provide only a limited amount of information about the actual musical sound of a piece of music, as is known, and particularly is this true with regard to music in the black tradition. The researcher should begin his work well armed with an understanding of African, European, and American history, cultural and social. He will be working with human beings as well as documents, so he must be sensitive, imaginative, and perceptive. He must be receptive to innovation, for he will hear music performed by musicians who defy all the rules and yet produce good music.¹⁷

In short, musicians do not create and perform in a vacuum. They are keen observers and reflections and interpreters of their surroundings. Additionally, their influences varied from both inside and outside their immediate cultural circles. Therefore, it is the historian's task to locate the artist and the recordings in the larger historical narrative and contextualize the story beyond a sequential list of events and influences.

Peter Guralnick's *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (1986) marked a shift from purely narrative or musical histories to social and popular music studies. Craig Werner observed in *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America* (2006), "Representing the march and the movement requires a montage, not a close up. When all we hear are the words of the great man (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr), we miss the deeper sources of the movement's energy."¹⁸ In other words, context matters and these recordings and artists play a significant role in

¹⁷ Eileen Southern, "Needs for Research in Black-American Music," *College Music Symposium* 13 (1973), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4037375751>, 51.

¹⁸ Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 4.

understanding the full breadth of historical and social movements. And the places of its creation serve as a landmark and touchpoint for those observations and commemorations, as well as a gathering place for dialogues about the past, present, and future.

In *Sweet Soul Music*, Guralnick traced the development of Southern rhythm and blues and soul music, its musicians, and the industries that supported it. He explored how social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances affected the artist and industry and conversely their influence on society and culture. He developed a strong and compelling historical narrative in four effective ways. First, he used a variety of primary sources to recount and recollect the history in a detailed and well-rounded manner. While Guralnick used many oral histories and interviews as source material, he never allowed them to stand on their own. He offered either corroborating source material or comment acknowledging its potential questionability. Second, Guralnick placed the music into a larger historical narrative of concurrent social, political, cultural, and economic histories. Third, Guralnick conveyed a deep appreciation and respect for the music and the artists who created it. He avoided the low-hanging fruit of music journalism's desire to critique and evaluate the music's quality and authenticity. Finally, Guralnick avoided notions of romanticism and primitivism in his subjects and their music. That same level of respect for the talent and professionalism of all involved in the record-making process profoundly guides my work in historic preservation.

Both Charles L. Hughes in *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (2015) and Elijah Wald in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the*

Invention of the Blues (2004) reexamine two important eras in African American music and challenge accepted sentiments regarding the musicians and their abilities. While Karl Hagstrom Miller, Charles Wolfe, and Benjamin Filene also addressed this narrative, they did so in order to argue their case against the markers of “pure,” “real,” and “authentic.” Hughes and Wald respected the musician’s and songwriter’s abilities and talents with their desire to set the record straight regarding their virtuosity and studied abilities. While the romantic notion of a population unaffected by modernity enticed many of the early folklorists and vernacular music scholars, music is not the result of some mythical connection of a simpler folk to the soil, a river, primitive ways, food, or any other immaterial source of artistic expression and talent. These musicians, songwriters, producers, and singers are professional embodiments of years of exposure to other music and study from performance and practice. While that practice and experience differs from that of a classical performer, it is no less rigorous to arrive at a level of professionalism and virtuosity.

In *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South*, Charles Hughes took a new look at the long held accepted narratives attached to 1960s soul and country music and challenges two prevailing concepts. First, he addresses the assumption that the artists in the country and soul triangle of Memphis, Muscle Shoals, and Nashville were natural musicians imbued by the surrounding culture to craft such original and soulful music.

Ironically, though, the promotion of the Memphis sound also quickly and fundamentally distorted the larger appreciation of these musicians. For one, it

misrepresented their accomplishments by framing them less as the result of hard work — the painstaking production of popular music — and more as the expression of a cultural or even natural essence that one record executive said, ‘cannot be duplicated anywhere else...[and] cannot be taught.’¹⁹ It ignored the musicians’ versatility, obscured their desire for commercial success, and erased their role in helping to construct this very mythology of musical naturalness. In other words, the Memphis sound turned the triangle’s musicians from skilled professionals into cultural conduits.²⁰

Second, Hughes argues against the romanticized perception, traced back to a Peter Guralnick’s *Sweet Soul Music*, of a race-free and color-blind studio environment. The musicians who created these classic recordings were able to work well together in the segregated south because they did not succumb to the outside pressures to separate. In other words, racial identity disappeared at the threshold of the studio in service due to the higher calling of the music. Hughes notes these two sentiments permeate the scholarship that succeeded the 1960s soul era and observed, “Many writers describe triangle musicians as vessels for authentic racial identity and the ‘Southern dream of freedom,’ but the musicians defined themselves as versatile professionals whose extensive training and hard work allowed them to play a wide variety of music, and to work across racial lines.”²¹ Additionally, the concept that the interracial congregation of musicians in studios such as Stax, King, and Fame succeeded because they did not notice or allow themselves to play into the social pressures is not giving the right credit to the musicians

¹⁹ Charles Hughes cites Elton Whisenhunt, “Memphis Sound: A Southern View,” *Billboard*, June 12, 1965, 6.

²⁰ Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 46.

²¹ *Ibid*, 6.

who created southern soul music. Hughes also questions the accepted narrative that the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr ended the era of interracial cooperation in southern studios and led to a Black Power centered ideology that African Americans should solely control their future and destiny. In his opinion, southern soul music had too easily become overly romanticized and narrow-casted into an era of simple musicians miraculously coming together in an interracial space, disrupted by the African American participants desire for control and identity. He concludes,

This is a fallacy. Nothing mattered more than race. Nothing structured their work more than the racial divisions and disparities that structured life and music making in the South...To remove race and racial history from their experiences is to ignore this painful reality and deny the musicians rightful place in the messy history of race and culture in the United States.²²

In the vein of a Guralnick-esque effort, Hughes locates music and musicians in the larger social and historical narrative to further solidify his thesis and music's rightful place in American history.

For decades, delta blues artist, Robert Johnson symbolized the epitome of the pre-war blues era and music scholars and fans deified his natural abilities and primitivistic approach to performance and songwriting. Elijah Wald in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, takes both of these narratives out to the woodshed for a serious reexamination and recontextualisation. To do so, Wald scoured the primary sources to reconstruct the popular forms of race music in the 1920s and 1930s. He discovered the prevailing preference of the audience was for the more

²² *Ibid*, 191.

sophisticated, arranged, composed, and studied styles presented by artists like Bessie Smith, Tampa Red, Lonnie Johnson, and Ma Rainey. Additionally, both folk and popular music influenced the artists who performed the more “traditional” style of delta or acoustic blues, like Charley Patton and Son House. Like Karl Hagstrom Miller and Benjamin Filene, Wald notes that the surviving sound recording documents were less a true reflection of the performer’s repertoire or abilities, but a production of folklorists and the commercial recording industry.

In a pattern that has been repeated ad infinitum, black performers were ghettoized, and their access to the recording world was dependent on their singing ‘black’ music, whatever their own tastes or the repertoire they may have featured in their live shows...it was racism and the vagaries of the recording industry that kept more of this from being preserved on wax.²³

Next Wald explores the development of the blues canon that regaled the delta singers, like Robert Johnson, but disregarded the more popular artists like Tampa Red or Mamie Smith. What he finds is a post-war romanticism that Johnson embodied a pure and authentic primitive window into the cultural life of African Americans in the Inter-war era Mississippi Delta. Scholars and collectors assumed that modernity or outside popular influences of mainstream or produced sound recordings did not sully Johnson’s recordings. Interestingly, Wald discovers Johnson’s modern fame is more of a window into the canonizers and fans desired reconstruction of the past rather than the actual history of the time.

²³ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*, (New York: Amistad Publishing, 2004), 22.

For a modern audience of college students, rock musicians, and historians, he [Robert Johnson] has been the dark king of a strange and haunting world, lost in the Mississippi mists and harried by demons — a legend more earthy, violent, and passionate than anything in our daily lives. Amidst all the mythologizing, it is not easy to stand back and treat Johnson as a normal human being, a talented artist who came along at a particular period in American music, and try to understand his world and his contributions rather than getting lost in the clouds of romanticism.²⁴

Wald interprets Johnson as a practiced and studied musician, not one who either naturally came upon his talents or as the result of a pact with an underworld figure.

While the sound of those recordings may convey a level of simplicity or naturalness, the players and compositions were anything but basic. This loss of this interpretation of the delta musician's influence does not diminish Johnson or his delta blues brethren from their place in the American musical history. Rather, Wald's reexamination holds Johnson in a more respectable light of talent and accomplishment, alongside other musicians of studied renown or virtuosity. This approach makes for a better preservation argument, as it aligns with the universal notion of the American dream — hard work provides a path to success and prosperity. These proper evaluations of the musical past, provide for amore salient and effective argument for historic preservation of the places of its production.

B. Brian Foster's, *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life* (2020) shows a melding of good history scholarship with public history insight. Foster, while taking a sociological and almost ethnomusicologist view of places like Clarksville, Mississippi, and its development of traditional blues tourism, adds to not only the historiography of popular music scholarship, but public history. His study of the

²⁴ *Ibid*, xvi.

population of Clarksville as the predominately black citizens confront an almost top-down decision of lawmakers and business owners to lean into the area's history of country blues from the 1920s and 1930s as a stimulus for economic development and tourism. Foster raises a serious issue that confronts all of the examples I discuss herein that interpretation and historic accuracy can be of the utmost importance, but also the preservation effort must address the concerns of local population whose history is interpreted and remain relevant to them. A solely 'frozen caveman' and stuck in a time warp commemoration serves largely a percentage of the outside visitor populace and leads to local resentment, which Baker notes of the Clarksville population as "that blues thing." Baker offers the following observations.

In some ways, you could read this as a blues development and tourism story. That Black Clarksdalians doubt the long-term viability of the town's blues development agenda echoes a voluminous body of scholarship on the ways natives respond to the inclusion of tourism in a place's economic development plan, entertainment scenes, and commercial landscape. The recurring story is that they respond with resentment and skepticism. This story echoes that one, except with more details (i.e., by considering how race, power, and history mediate local perceptions).²⁵

Baker emphasizes that any preservation and interpretation of historic musical spaces to include local voices, often those who will shoulder the burden of both financing the effort in tax dollars and work in these facilities. The effort also must not stop the interpretation and relevance at some artificial date in the past. The many examples included herein illustrate, if nothing else, an effort by various organization charged with the caretaking of

²⁵ B. Brian Foster, *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 107.

this history to be both inclusive and relevant. That relevancy manifests itself in current art creation, the embracing of modern artists and voices, and the inclusion both within and outside the four walls of the local population's past and current place in the history of the building and the music. These places should never be permanently stuck in the past; each must continue on as if that studio or record label still existed and had to draw from the current pool of talent who have been influenced by the art created there years earlier. Each should support original creators and not solely re-creators who might be viewed as nothing more than a tribute act.

This combination of modern music and public history scholarship helps both guide and argue more successfully for the preservation of recorded music spaces. But again, no central political organization exists, like it does for the recorded sound product, to save them. While a National Register designation exists from the federal government, it requires a vocal local effort to nominate it and for all intents and purposes, that designation does not keep it safe in perpetuity.

Let's All Go Back to the Old Landmark

Let us all; All go back
 To the old; Old landmark
 Let us all to the old,
 All go back old landmark
 Reverend Willie Morganfield and the Bell Grove Baptist Church Choir, "Old Landmark," 1977.²⁶

²⁶ Reverend Willie Morganfield and the Bell Grove Baptist Church Choir, "Old Landmark," traditional, released in 1977, Jewel 259, 45 rpm.

Thankfully, in the last ten years, despite the loss of many historical buildings, there have been more victories than ever before in preserving these properties. However, the losses are ones whereby a more politically organized and properly funded effort could have easily found some accommodation or preservation solution. This effort could have preserved dozens of buildings on Music Row in Nashville, in addition to the Bronze Peacock in Houston, Texas, Randy's Record Shop in Gallatin, Tennessee, Sigma Sound in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the building in Atlanta, Georgia, where Fiddlin John Carson recorded the oft-identified first commercially released country record in 1923.²⁷ It could also have intervened in situations where the building, while still standing, remains at peril from a relatively disinterested private owner, including J&M Studios and Sea-Saint Studios in New Orleans, LA and the King-Starday building in Nashville, TN.²⁸ However, these victories depend on the gathering together of disparate interested parties and rely too heavily on the intervention of a private wealthy benefactor or two. While these efforts must always bring together both public and private resources, the lack of

²⁷ The Bronze Peacock was razed in 2017. The City of Gallatin ordered Randy's Record Shop to be demolished in 2020. Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville purchased and razed the site of Fiddlin John Carson's historic 1923 recording session in 2019.

²⁸ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Cosimo Matassa's studio building still stands at 838-40 North Rampart Street in New Orleans, but in 2021 the space houses an art gallery and laundry facility, but has a small historical marker at the entryway but none on the street. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Alan Toussaint's Sea-Saint studio building still stands despite being flooded during Hurricane Katrina at 3809 Clematis Street in New Orleans. In 2021, the building houses a hairdresser with no marker acknowledging the building's historical significance. The King-Starday building stands abandoned at 3557 Dickerson Pike in Nashville. Woodbine Outreach purchased it in November 2021 and several historians and preservationists who toured the building found it in a condition of demolition through neglect with a collapsed roof and raw sewage throughout the building. The new owners hope to at least preserve the facade of the building's store front. Despite Historic Nashville naming it to its 2016 list of the Nashville Nine buildings in need of intervention, nothing has progressed its preservation efforts to date.

public intervention, save for the King Records example, and often last minute “Hail Mary” entry of private money, has made too many of these close calls often literally minutes from destruction.

In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I explore the efforts of two interwar sites, the Starr Piano and Gennett Records complex in Richmond, Indiana and the Bristol Sessions in the border city of Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia. Both of these sites lost the place where the musicians produced their sound recordings. Regardless of the loss of the place and many losses in efforts to preserve and interpret them over several decades, a strong local effort, mostly devoid of any political support, eventually adapted and now these small cities possess a proper memorialization of these spaces, safe from any erasure or development. Both of these efforts began in the late 1960s and early 1970s before music history possessed a body of work to situate it well within the conversation of its historical and social value. But thanks to a small but passionate local contingent of concerned citizens, historians, and preservationists, who both succeeded and failed, the public now has a place to commemorate and learn about the beginnings of American popular and vernacular music and engage in dialogs about its ceaseless influence on society and the arts today.

Chapter Five explores the case of the Stax Records building in South Memphis, now Soulsville, Tennessee. Although an effort by local preservationists and music enthusiasts attempted to save the building from its owners, the South Side Church of God in Christ, razed it in 1989. The chapter traces those efforts, as well as the City of

Memphis coming to its realization that its musical past was an indelible part of its historic fabric and an asset to its story and tourism. Then the city supported the largely private campaign to rebuild the fallen Stax Records building. This group not only rebuilt the Stax building and turned it into a museum, but also created a music academy adjacent to the museum to serve, inspire, and provide opportunity to Memphis' young people. For all intents and purposes, this effort, save for an organized political intervention and participation, served as a template or case-study for how to both preserve and interpret a site of recorded musical heritage, but creating one that also continues to engage and educate both the young and old, not only locally, but nationally and internationally.

Chapters Six and Seven examines the near five-decade effort to preserve the King Records complex of buildings in Cincinnati, Ohio. The major difference between this effort and the previous three discussed, is the very proactive and motivated political voice, that for all intents and purposes, saved the building from the wrecking ball. The King effort still required a group of passionate and dedicated local group of preservationists, artists and their families, and historians, but without the strong and bipartisan intervention of the City of Cincinnati government, it is safe to assume the building would no longer stand. This chapter furthers the argument for increased political involvement, by providing a template for not only how government power can be used, but the ultimate benefit to the citizens of both the locality in question but nationally and internationally.

There are several other properties that merit an in-depth study of the efforts to preserve and interpret those recorded musical spaces. The Gunter Hotel in Houston, Texas and 508 Park Avenue in Dallas, Texas, were temporary recording sites set up in the 1930s to most importantly record Robert Johnson. Both sites remain standing and while both engage in other for-profit businesses, both manage to interpret the spaces where these recordings occurred and make them available to the public. Two studios in the Muscle Shoals region of Alabama, FAME Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound are now each on the National Register of Historic Places and operate as both a fully functional and very active recording studio and as a historic site by interpreting the space and inviting the public to tour the space. While FAME managed to stay in business, as both a studio and music publishing company, through the motivated ownership of the Hall family, the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio required outside intervention. After Malaco Records and several other owners including an auto parts retailer abandoned the space and left it to rot, the Muscle Shoals Music Foundation, a group of local music historians and preservationists, purchased the building in 2013. The organization opened the space for tours and eventually the Beats headphone company donated one-million dollars to both historically refurbish the building to its 1970s period of significance appearance and add artifacts, including Chet Atkins' RCA Studio C recording console.²⁹

Another property worthy of further exploration is the Capricorn Records complex in Macon, Georgia. It was yet another building abandoned and left to rot before a group

²⁹ Many news outlets reported the console came from RCA Studio B, but Atkins' personal console was in the RCA Studio A building in his private office, which was dubbed RCA Studio C.

of locals and Mercer University stepped into both save it but create something both historically significant and valuable to the current and future populace. Mercer's multiple use concept offers inspiration and guidance to other similar efforts. In addition to a museum, Mercer renovated the Capricorn building to include a studio, working and classroom space, and a music incubator that offers rental rehearsal space.

While practically the entire canon of recorded music is available at price points that vary from free to just a few dollars a month and the shelves are loaded with books and documentaries on varying aspects of popular music history, the places of its production and dissemination do not share the same level of importance. There are over a hundred archives across the United States whose mission statements focus on the preservation and digitization of sound recordings. The same energy and organization must be trained on the built environment. Without the space, a large piece of the musical, cultural, and historic pie will be sorely missing. Also lost when these places are erased or inaccessible, a source of inspiration and site for future artists, creators, and professionals to voice their generation with the gravitas of the past.

- Chapter Two -

Treated Wrong Blues: The Starr Piano / Gennett Records

Property in Richmond, Indiana, 1890 - 1976

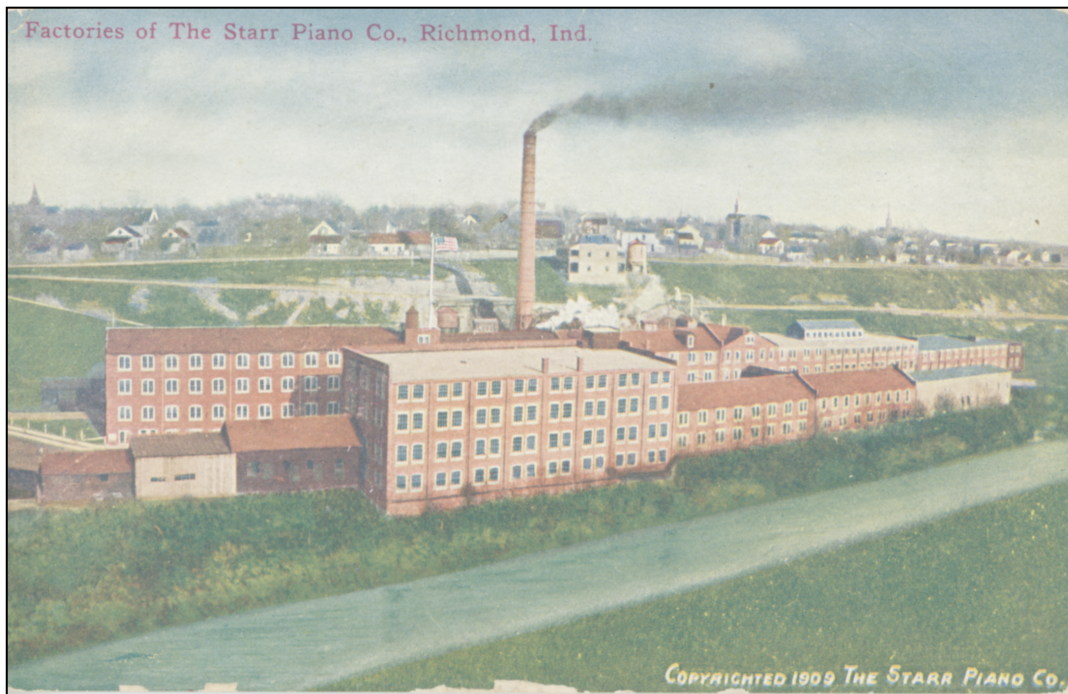


Figure 2: 1909 Postcard of Starr Valley, from author's collection.

Come here sweet babe,
 I want to ask one thing of thee
 Come here sweet babe,
 I want to ask one thing of thee
 What makes you treat everybody
 Better than you do poor me?
 Monette Moore, "Treated Wrong Blues." 1927.³⁰

On October 3, 1993, the Richmond, Indiana's local newspaper, *Palladium-Item*, asked local citizens to clip a coupon and answer a pressing question: Should we "Save or Raze" it? The remaining buildings in the Whitewater Gorge, better known to locals as Starr Valley, were the "it" in question. Starr Valley was a twenty-five plus acre, half-million square foot industrial complex that housed both the Starr Piano Company and Gennett Records. Several decades earlier, these buildings produced thousands of pianos and millions of sound recordings a year. Gennett Records recorded some of the earliest sides by American vernacular musicians in the jazz, blues, country, and spiritual genres. The studio in Richmond held the first integrated sessions in both country and jazz at the same time of the Ku Klux Klan resurgence in Indiana and Wayne County. The site, situated between the Whitewater River and a railroad embankment, once housed a vibrant business that employed several thousand local residents. The last occupant of note in the various buildings, Mercury Records, left in 1969, and the site suffered from years of vandalism and neglect by owners that no longer possessed a tie to the Gennett Family,

³⁰ Monette Moore, "Treated Wrong Blues," by Monette Moore and Naomi Carew, recorded in August 1923, 78 rpm. Even though this is not a Gennett release, the sentiments sung by Ms. Moore perfectly describes the preservation efforts for the Starr Piano / Gennett Records site.

Richmond, or the music business. The *Palladium-Item* asked its readers to consider the financial cost of saving or razing the buildings and asked a follow-up question to those in favor of saving the buildings, “Where should the city get the money?”³¹ This situation developed over the previous twenty-five years as the ownership changed hands and did little to revive the property, leaving the citizens of Richmond confronted with little to no clearly defined plan or organization. But in 1993, the problem became more pressing as a tipping point approached after a fire in the Logo Building.

On October 10, 1993, the *Palladium-Item* published the results of its “Save or Raze” survey. The responses revealed an even split. Those in favor of razing the remaining buildings invariably cited the cost, but most also lamented that Richmond cut its ties with the past and move on. Richmond resident, John Kowalee, asserted, “It’s an eye sore. The past is dead, so it’s buried. This is the land of the future and all things become new.” Rollie Langevin agreed, “Let’s live in the future, not in the past.” Those in favor of preservation argued that the site was a part of their heritage. Samuel H. Neff observed, “The building is a monument to Richmond’s heritage,” and Marilyn A. Russo added, “any historical treasure is valuable and needs long and careful consideration. Once it’s gone. It’s gone forever!”³² Debra Yates, in her op-ed piece in the *Palladium-*

³¹ “Viewpoints: Sound Off! The Starr-Gennett Building, Save or Raze,” *Palladium-Item*, October 3, 1993, p. B4, Fall 1993 reel, microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

³² “Viewpoints: The Starr Gennett Building, Save It or Raze It,” *Palladium-Item*, October 10, 1993, p. B4, Fall 1993 reel, microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

Item during the “Save or Raze” debate, best enunciated the local need to press for preservation. Yates proffered the following argument.

Our past is full of memorable people and events, but we are forgetting them. We could be restoring those old structures, recapturing our history, and building it all into a community that others would want to visit, and that we would be proud to live in. We can begin by saving the Starr-Gennett building. We cannot afford to throw away a single piece of our shared past for the sake of cost effectiveness . . . History is to a community as memory is to an individual, without it, there is no basis for identity and no foundation for building the future. In purely material terms, it may be cheaper to throw away our shared past than to save it. The intangible cost of losing that past is higher than we can ever afford to pay.³³

Yates understood and expressed the Starr-Gennett site’s importance to Richmond’s local heritage and those facts alone provided grounds for preservation efforts. Perhaps because the local paper served as the conduit of her argument and path to the audience that needed persuading, a discussion of the music recorded there was absent. Interestingly, the majority of responders only identified themselves, the local community, as stakeholders in this decision. Few if any confronted or addressed the cultural, musical, industrial, or racial history made in the Gorge. After all, the citizens were the ones likely to foot the majority of the bill, as state, federal, private, or music industry money and urgency remained largely absent.

Many of those in favor of saving the buildings in Starr Valley cited “heritage” in a generic sense as the primary reason for their support. Whose heritage was at issue in their minds? Would a clearly defined mission of heritage have been essential to forward

³³ Debra Yates, “We Can’t Afford Not to Save Our Past,” *The Palladium-Item*, 10/3/1993, 1, microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

progress? Was it their local heritage? Did they want to preserve the history of area families who worked in the factories for almost a century? Was it the heritage of the Gennett family, who grew Starr Piano and its affiliates into an industry leader? Was it a broader national history of the music recorded there by African Americans and rural whites largely from the South that became popular music? Was it the racial history of Gennett's early support for the vernacular music made by African Americans and the funding and dissemination of the first integrated recording sessions in both jazz and country music³⁴ at a time when many residents of Richmond and employees at Starr-Gennett joined the Ku Klux Klan?³⁵ And thus, with whom did the responsibility rest in guiding, interpreting, and funding such an effort?

After all, the Gennett Records story is largely one of outsiders. Locals did not create the cannon or the storied past celebrated in its history. The story of the label developed from a family that hailed from Nashville, who purchased the growing local Starr Piano company, expanded it several fold, and then guided into the record business. While the company employed thousands of locals, many of whose families remained in Richmond for subsequent generations, the company hired trades and craftsmen from outside the city and country, many from Germany. The story that others, largely beyond Richmond, recount focuses primarily on the outsiders who recorded

³⁴ In jazz, it was the Jelly Roll Morton and New Orleans Rhythm Kings collaboration in 1923. In Country it was many side recorded by Taylor's Kentucky Boys in 1927 that featured African American fiddler Jim Booker and his brother John Booker on guitar.

³⁵ No member of the Gennett Family were Klan members, as they were second-generation immigrants, Catholic, and were releasing jazz music.

music in Starr Valley. These were musicians who came in for a day or two of recording and then left to enjoy the possible fruits of their time in Richmond. None had roots in or ever lived in or near the city. They were jazz artists from New Orleans, hillbilly musicians from Kentucky, the ‘Singing Cowboy’ from Texas, blues artists from the Mississippi Delta, and the composer from Bloomington, Indiana, who have since made the Gennett name famous.

While many local artists recorded at Gennett, they were fair to middling, but none of them iconic or historically significant. That lack of connection from place to creator reflected in the same divide between historical significance and local buy-in. Yet it was the people of Richmond who toiled in the factory and built the pianos and phonographs, who operated the recording machinery, and who pressed the records. It was the locals who learned the art and science of recording and grew into effective A&R men, recording engineers, and talent evaluators as well as marketers of sound recordings just as much as any other record company in that era. However, the public at large celebrate and commemorate the musical talent when recounting this era in music history. No wonder there existed such disconnect in the response letters and the lack of local ownership. How do we connect these two and should the burden fall largely on the locals whose town contains no major corporate or private benefactor, nor does its economy rarely show signs of positive momentum?

This local debate about the Starr Valley site and its outcome presents an excellent case study for a bigger crisis in historical and cultural preservation: Who has the

responsibility and financial burden to preserve a local site of national significance in the history of recorded music and culture? Yes, there might be the benefit of tourism money, but that is never guaranteed nor is it stable. No federal grants or programs of assistance or intervention were available to them as they wrestled with this decision. In fact, the preservation of music heritage was a new concept. Several private foundations and the federal government developed programs for the preservation of the product, the sound recordings, but none addressed Richmond's immediate issues with Starr Valley.

Compounding the issue was that the physical setting of Starr Valley in 1993 did not resemble the facilities present in the company's 1920s heyday. Dozens of the buildings, including the recording studio, had long since been demolished. Only an exoskeleton remained of one of the manufacturing and pressing plants, as well as a vault from the Administration building and a smokestack. The grounds more closely resembled the blank slate that existed before Starr Piano began in the late 1800s rather than the vibrant industrial complex that existed the first quarter of the twentieth century. So, what should be done with a shell of a manufacturing building and a few other random structures. Should it simply be preserved as is with some proper interpretive markers? Should key buildings, such as the recording studio, be rebuilt? Both are excellent and pertinent questions to ask, but should the residents of Richmond, several decades removed from Starr-Gennett's era of significance shoulder the responsibilities to carry a burden largely unguided and unfunded? Certainly not. Preservation and development of

such a massive site called for the investment from stakeholders outside of the city and the state.

Why Should I Grieve After You're Gone: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Gennett Records

After you're gone, I'm left all alone.
 Just feeling blue, all depending on you.
 Not even the telephone, it don't ring anymore.
 Not even the sun that shines, don't shine in my door anymore.
 Since you've been gone away, many a million miles away.
 I will give you a million smiles a day, to keep your blues away.
 Lonnie Johnson, "Why Should I Grieve After You're Gone," 1927.³⁶

To better understand why the property of Starr Piano and Gennett Records needed a more vigorous and multi-faceted preservation effort, its history, events, people, and products required careful examination to identify and appreciate its national and international significance.

Henry Gennett was born on September 13, 1852, in Nashville, Tennessee. He was the eighth of nine children. His family was acquainted through various business ties to two other prominent Nashville families, the Lumsdens and the Frenchs. The business ties between the families became even closer through the marriages of John Lumsden's three

³⁶ Lonnie Johnson (pseudonym George Jefferson), "Why Should I Grieve after You Are Gone," by Lonnie Johnson, recorded on December 14, 1927, Gennett 6423, 78 rpm.

daughters. The oldest, Caroline or “Callie,” married Jesse French in 1872, and the youngest, Alice, married Henry Gennett in 1876.³⁷

Jesse French became the first of the extended families to enter the music business in 1873, when he purchased a Nashville piano business and renamed it the Jesse French Piano Company. On January 1, 1884, Henry Gennett paid \$15,000 and became an equal partner with a twenty-five interest in French’s piano company. The partnership of Oscar Field, Jesse French, John Lumsden, and Henry Gennett lasted twenty years in the retail piano and music business. By 1891, Henry Gennett relocated to St. Louis to serve in his role as the company’s vice-president. Gennett led the transition of the firm from solely retailing pianos into manufacturing and distribution. To complete his vision, Henry Gennett sought to purchase an established and reputable piano manufacturing company.

The Starr Piano Company began in 1849 when George Trayser began building pianos and melodeons in Indianapolis, Indiana. Richmond, Indiana businessmen, James Starr and Richard Jackson encouraged Trayser to move his company to Richmond in 1869. In 1878, Trayser Piano Forte Company incorporated and renamed itself the Chase Piano Company after Milo Chase, who became the company’s chief of operations after Trayser’s retirement. The owners purchased twenty-five acres along the Whitewater River and constructed a six-story building along the river’s eastern bank. This building soon became the headquarters for the Starr Piano Company and Gennett Records and where thousands of Richmond residents worked through the 1950s. James Starr became

³⁷ Charlie B. Dahan and Linda Gennett Irmischer, *Images of America: Gennett Records and Starr Piano* (Mt Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2016), 7-8.

the company's president and his brother, Benjamin, the head of operations for the rapidly expanding factory complex. The piano transcended to the centerpiece of American homes that provided both entertainment and cultural expression.³⁸

At the same time of Starr's expansion, the Jesse French Piano and Organ Company grew into one of the largest retailers of pianos and organs in the southern and midwestern states. Jesse French Piano retailed the popular and well-crafted Starr Piano brand. Soon merger negotiations commenced between the Jesse French Piano Company and the Starr brothers. On April 7, 1893, Henry Gennett and John Lumsden purchased a fifty-percent ownership stake and joined the company's board of directors.³⁹

The arrival of Henry Gennett and his entrepreneurial and visionary skills provided the newly organized Starr Piano Company a much-needed boost from his St. Louis office. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago recognized Starr Pianos excellence with four awards. However, in January 1894, a huge fire, likely caused by a malfunctioning generator known as a dynamo, burned and destroyed much of the Richmond factory complex. Rumors persisted of Starr moving its headquarters to St. Louis. However, John Lumsden stated that he did not believe in "crying over spilled milk" and confirmed Starr Piano's commitment to rebuild and expand in Richmond.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gertrude Luckhardt Ward, *Richmond: A Pictorial History* (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, Inc., 1994), 118-119. Windover, Michael, and James Deaville, "Setting the Tone in Early 20th-Century North American Living Rooms: The Parlor Piano," *In The Sound of Architecture: Acoustic Atmospheres in Place*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Elisavet Kiourtsoglou, 45-58. Leuven University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv26dhjbs.6>.

³⁹ Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7-9.

⁴⁰ "Will Rebuild. The Starr Piano Works Will Erect New Buildings," *Richmond Item*, Jan 11, 1894, p. 4, microfilm collection in Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

Because of this calamity, Henry Gennett sold his interest in the Jesse French operation and moved to Richmond. Henry Gennett believed the Richmond-based business possessed more profit potential with its skilled craftsmen and labor. He supervised the rebuilding and expansion of the factory complex. With Henry Gennett's focused leadership, Starr Piano rapidly expanded its marketshare in the burgeoning piano industry. Henry Gennett assumed full control of Starr Piano after the deaths of John Lumsden in 1899, James Starr in 1900, and Benjamin Starr in 1903.

By 1900, the Starr Piano Company manufactured fifty-two styles of pianos, which it distributed to its retail outlets in twenty-four cities. In addition to the Starr brand, the company manufactured pianos for the leading department stores and mail order companies, including Sears & Roebuck. As the company expanded, Henry Gennett looked to his three sons to help run the factory and retail operations. Henry's oldest son, Harry Gennett joined Starr Pianos in 1895, with Clarence Gennett in 1896 and Fred Gennett in 1905 soon to follow.⁴¹

With the success of Starr Pianos, the Gennett family became one of the prominent families in Richmond and a dynamic leader in its cultural community. Clarence Gennett purchased the lot on the corner of 8th and South A Street and opened the 1,200 seat Gennett Theater on December 22, 1899. Clarence and his family were active patrons in the theater and sponsored many theatrical and musical attractions to Richmond, including the Russian classical pianist, Mark Hamborg, as a part of his 1900 world tour that

⁴¹ Ward, *Richmond: A Pictorial History*, 118-119.

included New York City, Brussels, Berlin, and London.⁴² While the Gennett's success in the piano business contributed to the exposure of cultural activities in Richmond, the subsequent growth of the phonograph industry threatened its market share.

While the piano industry flourished at the turn of the twentieth century, the recently introduced phonograph began to compete with the piano for the place as the centerpiece of the American living room. The two leading phonograph companies, the Victor Talking Machine Company and the Columbia Record Company, expanded aggressively to both grow and control the industry. Victor and Columbia's first challenge was to overcome the public perception that its technology possessed only novelty value. Its initial endeavors of using the technology for entertainment initially found success with novelty recordings and novelty uses (coin operated machines in arcades and bars, for example). The novelty promotion of the talking machine proved a successful strategy in the 1890s, but that success waned, as do all novelties.⁴³

In order to survive, the record industry needed a reboot. Susan C. Cook notes, "For the first five years of *Talking Machine World's*⁴⁴ existence, [editor] Edward Lyman Bill's editorials largely defended talking machines against perceptions that they were a

⁴² 1900 Hamborg Concert Program, the Starr-Gennett Collection, Morrison-Reeves Library, Richmond, Indiana.

⁴³ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 157-158.

⁴⁴ *Talking Machine World*, founded in 1905, was the main trade publication for the photograph industry.

frivolous novelty associated with cheap entertainments.”⁴⁵ Entrepreneurs wanted to elevate the phonograph from a novelty gadget to a source for cultural uplift and education. Both companies released Eurocentric and highbrow sound recordings of classical, opera, and ballroom dance. Victor and Columbia also pursued various tactics to maintain their duopoly and stop any potential competitor from the outset. Victor and Columbia accomplished this market control through a series of court cases and backroom agreements that pooled its patents for the industry standard and popular lateral recording and cutting process. The two companies thus insured that no other company could enter the recording industry using the now industry-standard and publicly accepted lateral technology.

When Starr Piano eventually entered the recording industry, it filled a void of musical styles. Victor and Columbia catalogs lacked any recordings of vernacular music created by African Americans or southern whites. These two companies considered this music “low brow.” Victor did record several African American artists before 1920. However these artists, Victor believed, appealed to both white and African American customers, which included George Washington Johnson, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet, Charley Case, and George Walker.⁴⁶ These two record

⁴⁵ Susan C. Cook, “Talking Machines and Bodies of Sound: Marketing Recorded Dance Music before World War I,” *Bodies of Sound. Studies Across Popular Music and Dance*, vol. 1 (2013), 154.

⁴⁶ Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 7.

companies believed the release of music that was not “esteemed” reinforced the novelty perception of the phonograph.

The public looked to Victor and Columbia as a cultural authority in the field of music and sound recordings. Lawrence Levine in *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, argues that this perception led to “the desire of promoters of the new high culture to convert audiences into a collective of people reacting individually rather than collectively, was increasingly realized by the twentieth century.”⁴⁷ Karl Hagstrom Miller in *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* adds, “Levine is quick to point out that the emergent cultural hierarchy was propelled by racial — as well as class — ideology...Opera and orchestral music may have come to signify white cultural supremacy in an era characterized by the racial violence of lynching and Jim Crow segregation, as well as by the growing fear that white children were, in the words of an influential editorial in 1913 ‘falling prey to the collective soul of the negro through the influence of what is popularly known as ‘rag time’ music.”⁴⁸ In 1953, Eldridge Johnson, the founder of the Victor Talking Machine Company and one of the ‘inventors’ of the lateral recording and cutting process, reflected on the first quarter century of the record industry. Johnson stated, “Only great musical

⁴⁷ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow : The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization: 1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 195.

⁴⁸ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 163-164.

talent could transform the phonograph record from a toy into the greatest medium of home entertainment this country had known.”⁴⁹

In the August 15, 1919, edition of *Talking Machine World*, William Braid White addressed the recording industry and stated that it possessed “in their hands the future of the trade and that they [the retailers] can make it a permanent industry and a permanent element in the life of the American people if they choose to handle it intelligently, but not at all otherwise.” White continued, “The future of our industry lies in encouraging the sale of high-priced goods and the best records. It does emphatically not lie in pushing cheap machines and jazz.”⁵⁰ Jazz became a burgeoning genre from African American roots in Louisiana that started to permeate American popular culture in 1917, when several white bands, including the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and Bailey’s Lucky Seven, played and recorded a more restrained and less syncopated version of this music.⁵¹ Change in industry standard practices comes from the outside and such an upheaval proved impossible without access to the popular lateral technology.

Victor and Columbia’s stranglehold on the sound recording marketplace through its pooled lateral recording and pressing process prevented other companies from both entering and seriously competing with these two record companies. While a public

⁴⁹ *The Fifty Year Story of RCA Victor Records* (New York: Dept. of Information, Radio Corp. of America, 1953), 33.

⁵⁰ William Braid White, “Featuring the Musical Possibilities of the Talking Machine.” *Talking Machine World*, August 15, 1919, accessed December 1, 2013, <https://archive.org/stream/talkingmachinew15bill#page/n150/mode/1up>.

⁵¹ David Wondrich, *Stomp and Swerve: American Music Gets Hot, 1843-1924* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2003), 189-213.

domain recording and pressing process existed, the vertical or 'hill and dale' method, the majority of the American public possessed only the ability to play the lateral discs produced and sold by Victor and Columbia. Therefore, the consumer could only access the music both firms decided to produce and distribute into the marketplace.⁵² That changed when Henry Gennett's three sons aggressively responded to the growing opportunity to expand their successful piano company into the burgeoning sound recording field. The phonograph industry proved both a natural fit for Starr Piano factory's manufacturing capabilities and its retail network that it could become a serious threat for marketshare in the home entertainment industry. Starr Piano's entry into the recording industry caused a paradigm shift in the music recorded by a new generation of record label entrepreneurs.

At 11:00 a.m. on Saturday, June 12, 1915, Starr Piano Company's board of directors called a special meeting to order. Henry Gennett's three sons and his wife, Alice Lumsden Gennett, introduced an amendment to the Starr Piano's Charter and Articles of Incorporation. The board unanimously agreed to expand into the phonograph industry.

The object of its foundation is the manufacture, purchase, sale, lease, and use of all and every instruments, machines, devices, processes, and materials necessary and suitable in and about the production, preservation, use, and control of sound-vibrations for musical, commercial, and other economic purposes, including all

⁵² In the vertical or "hill and dale" process, the needle travelled through the groove in an up and down fashion. In the lateral process, the needle travelled through the groove in a back and forth fashion. The lateral process produced both a more stable disc and superior sound recording. While adapters existed that allowed the public to play both style recordings, few purchased this tone arm, as the output of the vertical companies were not as popular as Victor and Columbia's lateral records. See Addendum for a diagram of the difference between lateral and vertical.

accessories and parts, and to buy and sell and generally deal in merchandise of kinds similar or incident to aforesaid objects and purposes.⁵³

The company's board secretary, Fred Gennett, affixed his signature to the minutes and the Starr Piano Company entered into the sound recording industry. Fred Gennett stated this amendment provided Starr Piano with the ability "to keep pace with the progress in inventions and appliances, which it is constantly necessary to use in order to meet competition on an equal footing at home and abroad. Among innovations immediately planned to be introduced by the Starr Piano Company will be a complete line of phonographs of a quality worthy of their name."⁵⁴ Additionally, the Starr Piano Company announced its plan to release sound recordings.

From the outset, Starr's new line of discs mirrored the middle-of-the-road and highbrow output of Victor and Columbia. However, it faced an uphill battle due to its inability to use the patented lateral technology on its releases, and thus used the less popular vertical or 'hill and dale' discs. Fred Gennett, now the head of the recording division, spotted an opening to challenge Victor and Columbia's lateral patent duopoly. On December 10, 1918, one of the two lateral patents expired and Fred Gennett believed the remaining one held by Victor was duplicitous and not valid. In fact, he possessed the opinion that the United States Patent and Trademark Office should never have issued Victor a patent in the first place. Fred Gennett intended to challenge this remaining

⁵³ Starr Piano Company Board of Director Minutes, June 12, 1915, from the Starr Piano collection at the Wayne County Historical Society Archives in Richmond, Indiana.

⁵⁴ "Starr Piano Co. Will Manufacture Phonographs," *The Evening Item*, June 17, 1915, 8c2. Microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

patent claim for the lateral process created by Eldridge Johnson and held by the Victor Talking Machine Company. Starting in 1919, Starr Piano's newly christened Gennett Records announced in a full-page ad in *Talking Machine World* that its records were now available in both vertical and lateral discs.

As Fred Gennett predicted and also provoked, Victor immediately sued Starr Piano for a temporary injunction. Victor eventually lost its request for an injunction in January 1920. This verdict proved a surprise as in most intellectual property infringement cases, the courts awards an injunction to temporarily halt the use of the intellectual property while the judicial system considers the question of infringement; a lengthy process. An injunction is basically a time-out without assigning a guilty or not-guilty verdict. So this early victory for Gennett, proved both surprising and very consequential with both intended and unintended outcomes.

Subsequent cases to appeal the initial denial met with the same fate, and by 1920, every record label released its new recordings on the popular lateral disc. The *Victor Talking Machine Company vs. Starr Piano* lawsuit acted as a catalyst for the rapid growth of new record companies. However, these new record companies quickly realized the same challenges in the popular and highbrow music marketplace released by the larger and more established Victor and Columbia. These new companies needed to take advantage of vacuums of musical styles these two companies ignored from the outset, American vernacular music. It is logical to conclude that the recording industry would eventually branch into the recording of race and hillbilly music, but there is no doubt

Starr Piano's patent victory seriously catalyzed this process. Many music historians and aficionados lament the lost opportunities to hear race and hillbilly music not recorded between 1900 through 1920. At the same time, one can imagine the amount of influential music that also could have been silenced if Starr Piano simply waited a few years for the patents to expire or for Victor and Columbia to evolve and expand.

Plenty of evidence suggested that a significant market existed for race and hillbilly music. Patrons packed in clubs in Chicago and New Orleans to hear the latest black jazz bands led by Kid Ory and Joseph 'King' Oliver. African American singers drew a lot of customers throughout the United States on the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit of black Vaudeville theaters. Fiddling contests of hillbilly music proved a popular attraction throughout the southern states. *The Chicago Defender*, the leading African American newspaper in the United States, published editorials that implored Victor and Columbia to release race music. The black newspapers insisted its readers possessed both the funds and lateral phonographs to become a profitable market for such releases. Victor and Columbia simply ignored their calls and never considered expanding its infrastructure to develop those genre-specific marketplaces. Instead, Victor employed a strategy of cultural uplift and "decided to concentrate on trying to sell the prestigious Red Seal classical recordings to Negroes."⁵⁵ Therefore, change needed to come from the outside of the established industry, which came from a combination of two fledgling record companies trying to find its footing in the newly available lateral market.

⁵⁵ Robert Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1970), 12.

The first was Starr Piano's Gennett record label, fresh from its patent victory against Victor. The second came from Okeh Records, an upstart label founded by German immigrant Otto Heinemann.

Within months of US District Court Judge Learned Hand denying Victor's appeal and throwing its patent claim into the public domain, Okeh released recordings by African American singer, Mamie Smith. Perry Bradford, who organized and produced the sessions for Mamie Smith, noted to Fred Hager, the recording manager at Okeh, "There are fourteen million Negroes in our great country, and they will buy records if recorded by one of their own, because we are the only folks that can sing and interpret hot jazz songs just off the griddle correctly."⁵⁶ Mamie Smith's first release, recorded in February 1920, mirrored the popular and mainstream pop jazz style and featured an all-white backing band. "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" saw solid, but unremarkable sales. However, the African American community attempted to rally around this release.

Henry Pace and W.C. Handy, who published the sheet music for Smith's first two recordings, implored the readers of the *Chicago Defender* to purchase this disc. "Lovers of music everywhere, and those who desire to help in any advance of the Race should be sure to buy this record as encouragement to the manufacturers for their liberal policy and to encourage other manufacturers who may not believe that the Race will buy records

⁵⁶ Jas Obrecht, "Mamie Smith: The First Lady of the Blues," *Jas Obrecht Music Archive*, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://jasobrecht.com/mamie-smith-the-first-lady-of-the-blues/>.

sung by its own singers.”⁵⁷ Smith’s second recording, released in August of 1920, “Crazy Blues,” is recognized as the first race recording. It featured an African American backing-band and Okeh marketed it largely to an African American audience. The release of “Crazy Blues” sold extremely well. Perry Bradford claimed it sold over 75,000 copies in Harlem alone in the first month. Though sales data from Okeh Records did not survive, by all indications, “Crazy Blues” counted as a success. One of the major reasons this record succeeded lie in Okeh’s access to lateral phonographs in the homes of African Americans due to Starr Piano’s patent challenge.⁵⁸

With the burgeoning success of female blues artists accompanied by a small jazz band, Gennett Records scouted and recorded similar performers in its New York City studio. However, Gennett did not create a separate race series in their catalog. Historically, many equate this period of early race recordings simply with the blues, however, it included any music marketed to an African American audience. Gennett made little headway in the new race market with the ‘classic blues’ style performers in its New York City studio. However from its Richmond headquarters, Gennett Records discovered several other gaps in the market and exploited them to the betterment of the company’s bottom-line and the future of music and culture.

First, Starr Piano invested in a massive expansion of both its piano and phonograph manufacturing capabilities in 1919. *The Richmond Item* noted this

⁵⁷ Henry Pace and W.C. Handy, “Pace & Handy,” *Chicago Defender*, July 31, 1920, 4. Proquest Historical Newspapers, accessed March 26, 2016.

⁵⁸ Allan Sutton, *Race Records and the American Recording Industry, 1919-1945* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2016), 15-18.

aggressive expansion not only increased the company's output capacity, but required an additional 300 to 500 employees, thus the total working population of Starr Valley grew to over 1,500 employees.⁵⁹ Additionally, in 1921, Starr Piano opened a recording studio in its Richmond, Indiana industrial complex, which was the only permanent recording facility between New York City and San Francisco with the exception of Chicago.⁶⁰ The new studio placed Gennett Records in the unique position to record the popular and vernacular music emanating from Chicago, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. Gennett also developed links to rural artists drawn largely from the hills of Kentucky. Gennett realized that little to no competition existed with regional and local music and that a significant population possessed both the finances and technology to consume these sound recordings.

Starr Piano's Chicago store manager, Fred Wiggins, scouted and recommended several jazz artists popular at the Lincoln Gardens and the Friar's Inn nightclubs. Richmond's Penn Station regularly received trains from Chicago and Wiggins soon sent such groundbreaking jazz pioneers as the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band featuring Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton down the line to record in the newly opened studio. Rick Kennedy in *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots* observes, "Despite its location in

⁵⁹ "The Starr Co. Will Want 300-500 More Men," *Richmond Item*, June 29, 1919, page 1, section 2, microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

⁶⁰ "Making Phonograph Records Is Revealed Here as Most Intricate Process," *The Richmond Item*, September 20, 1925, 14, microfilm collection, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

rural Indiana, the Richmond studio produced some of the first significant jazz recordings and exerted an impact on the music scene that was immediate, widespread, and lasting.”⁶¹ These jazz recordings possess the more authentic New Orleans sound with plenty of syncopation, soloing, and improvisation that differed from the more staid and composed jazz released between 1917 and 1922 by the white jazz bands.

The Starr Piano complex quickly became a microcosm of the American experience in the 1920s, and to a certain extent, a more progressive one. Over twenty-percent of the white male population of Wayne County, Indiana, and its county seat, Richmond, affiliated in some form with the Ku Klux Klan, including many employees of the Starr Piano Company.⁶² Despite the Klan’s anti-black, anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, anti-interracial positions, aversion to the rising popularity of jazz music, and its strong ties to the sociopolitical affairs of the State of Indiana, the Starr Piano Company recorded artists from all styles and walks of life regardless of race, color, or religion. This inclusive approach included several racially integrated sessions, including the Jelly Roll Morton with New Orleans Rhythm Kings collaboration and Taylor’s Kentucky Boys, amongst the most notable. Regardless if the intent of these recordings served more as a function of profit than for social progress, the fact they occurred at all in a hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity remains notable.

⁶¹ Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy*, 53.

⁶² Chelsea Sutton, “Klan Records: Wayne County KKK Records Paint Picture of Klan Life in 1920s Indiana and Offer Data about Our Ancestors,” *Connections*, Indiana Historical Society, Spring/Summer 2015, 27-36.

Gennett's Chicago connection also brought several acoustic blues and country artists to Richmond, including Georgia Tom Dorsey (Thomas A. Dorsey), Big Bill Broonzy, and Scrapper Blackwell. In 1929, Paramount Records leased the Richmond studio and sent some of its groundbreaking race artists to record in Gennett's facilities with Gennett's engineers. Some of the artists Paramount sent included Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and the Mississippi Sheiks. Gennett's ties to WLS's popular country music radio show, the *National Barn Dance*, brought two of its biggest stars, Gene Autry and Bradley Kincaid, to its Richmond studio several times.

Gennett also developed relationships with rural Kentucky music talent scouts Dennis Taylor and Doc Roberts. These connections to rural music established Gennett as a leader in the burgeoning hillbilly music field, which includes four artists to date inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee.⁶³ Charles Wolfe in *Kentucky Country* observes, "From 1925 to 1933, Gennett recorded more country music from Kentucky than from any other state, and preserved many rare examples of the variety of traditional music in Kentucky."⁶⁴

With all these innovative records made in Richmond, why did the modern citizens of Richmond not cite them as a reason to preserve the remaining Starr Valley buildings?

⁶³ Gennett recording artists Vernon Dalhart, Ernest Stoneman, Gene Autry, and Uncle Dave Macon are inducted into both the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN and the Starr-Gennett Walk of Fame in Richmond, IN.

⁶⁴ Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 26-27.

Music historians are partially to blame as well as a lack of a music history complex to help contextualize and promote its significance. Only recently have scholars emphasized the significance of early 20th century American vernacular and popular musicians. Karl Hagstrom Miller in *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010) noted, “This understanding of music as work for the civilized middle class stood in stark contrast to contemporaneous depictions of music in primitive or folk cultures. Primitive people were naturally musical, scholars insisted. Primitive music did not require work.”⁶⁵ Miller added, “Instead of creating music that spoke of their labors, they played music that transformed them. They used music to forge new identities for themselves as skilled professionals and grassroots musical entrepreneurs.”⁶⁶ Charles Hughes also argued against the once-popular perception of primitivism. Hughes discusses music created after Gennett closed, but the sentiment remains true. He observed, “Many writers describe triangle [Nashville, Memphis, and Muscle Shoals] musicians as vessels for authentic racial identity and the ‘Southern dream of freedom,’ but the musicians defined themselves as versatile professionals whose extensive training and hard work allowed them to play a wide variety of music, and to work across racial lines. They were craftspeople, not conduits; or as Elijah Wald describes early blues performers, ‘pros not primitives.’”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 57.

⁶⁶ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 58.

⁶⁷ Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 6.

A more important factor in the 1990s indifference towards the abandoned buildings in Starr Valley lay in chronological distance and perspective. Those raising the issue of preservation in their responses to the “Save or Raze” question asked the citizens of Richmond to evaluate a body of work over seventy years old, produced and distributed by a company that lacked a presence in the city for over a generation. For as quickly as Starr Piano’s recording division arose, it just as quickly crashed. After several years of strong growth in all facets of their business, Starr Piano suffered declining sales and revenue with the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the subsequent Great Depression. Additionally, the increased competition from radio and motion pictures aided in its collapse and eventual decision to close the label and piano company. By December 1934, except for sound effects records, Gennett was out of the record business. It licensed some of its masters and the name of its Champion label to Jack Kapp of American Decca, who eventually located some of his label’s manufacturing to the Richmond complex. Gennett sold its metal masters of thousands of recordings for scrap to help meet the mounting bills as its receivables sharply declined.

None of the three Gennett brothers, their sister Rose, or their mother Alice possessed any interest in looking back or attempting to put into context the historical music of which they oversaw the production in some form. It probably came as a great surprise in 1939 when Oglethorpe University in Georgia requested the Gennett family send five records from the Gennett Records catalog for inclusion in its ‘Crypt of Civilization.’ Dr. Thornwell Jacobs requested a copy of William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross

of Gold” speech, two Hopi Indian recordings made at the El Tovar Hotel in Arizona, and two other releases. Dr. Jacobs placed the five records in the crypt, not to be opened until 8113 AD, along with other forms of media that captured the various aspects of life in the 1930s. Despite the inclusion in such an endeavor, the Gennett family still did not see the importance of the music. To them, this past business succeeded and then failed miserably and it ended there. There was no going back, no interest to pursue a continued presence in the industry or as a part of the situation to place Gennett into any larger historical context.⁶⁸

I Tore Up Your Picture When You Said Goodbye: Starr Valley Abandoned

I have tried to erase from my mind your sweet face
 And I find that it is only in vein.
 I tore up your picture when you said good bye.
 Charles Hart, “I Tore Up Your Picture When You Said Goodbye,” 1928.⁶⁹

While the Gennett family abandoned the record business, Harry Gennett attempted to revive the Starr Piano company throughout the 1940s. By 1949, however, he gave up due to the lack of profitability and demand while buoyed by the success of the Starr Freeze refrigeration business and its growth. With that the family sought buyers or uses other than piano manufacturing for the dozens of buildings in Starr Valley.

⁶⁸ “City Will Be Remembered in 8113,” *The Palladium Item*, Richmond, IN, October 8, 1939, p8c2, from Morrison-Reeves Library collection.

⁶⁹ Charles Hart, “I Tore Up Your Picture When You Said Goodbye,” by Morse and Donnelly, recorded on June 18, 1928, Gennett 6508, 78 rpm.

This business shift led to a series of family disputes over the company's direction and finances. Harry Gennett, Rose Gennett Martin, and Alice Lumsden Gennett, who held seventy-percent of Starr Piano and its factory complex, left for California to build upon the Starr Freeze refrigeration company. Fred and Clarence Gennett maintained their thirty-percent stake and developed other business opportunities including hospital supplies, a travel agency, and manufacturing houseboats, amongst others. Neither Gennett family faction showed any interest in the history of the company and the music it released.

By 1951, the Richmond-based Fred and Clarence Gennett pursued buyers for the largely abandoned factory facility.⁷⁰ The City of Richmond explored an acquisition of the over twenty-five acres of land and 450,000 square feet of floor space for use as a light plant site for a reported half-million dollars. However, probably due to the site's location in a flood plain, the City of Richmond demurred and the Gennetts pursued other suitors.

Harry Alpert of J. Solotken Company, a scrap metal and paper salvage company, purchased a majority ownership of the Starr Valley industrial complex via an auction in 1952. The families of Rose Gennett Martin, Alice Lumsden Gennett, and Harry Gennett sold Alpert their seventy-percent share of the company, while Fred and Clarence Gennett retained the remaining thirty-percent. Alpert invested in the property for uses other than for a return to the piano and record business. He stated, "We have discarded the

⁷⁰ "Starr Piano Studies as Light Plant Site," *Palladium-Item*, August 17, 1951, p1, newspapers.com, accessed June 1, 2020.

possibility of continuing to make pianos.”⁷¹ Alpert wanted to lease the space to other manufacturers and businesses. Among the first tenants included Decca Records, box manufacturer Menasha Woodenware, F&N Lawn Mower, Always Moving and Storage and the Crosley division of Avco. Of those initial lessees, only Menasha and Decca operated a business, the others largely used the space for storage. Decca operated a vinyl record manufacturing concern in the Starr Valley complex through 1956 when Mercury Records took over the facility. It operated its record manufacturing business there through 1969.⁷²

On Thursday, July 31, 1952, Alpert auctioned off the contents of the piano and record companies. As several former plant employees watched the manufacturing and office equipment sold off, William Kaeuper noted to the *Palladium-Item* newspaper, “Kind of a funny feeling watch it all go.” Kaeuper was a former foreman at Starr Piano in the woodworking department, who along with his brother, Fred, the key shop supervisor, had worked at the company for a total of one-hundred years.⁷³ Several decades later in the 1970s, William’s son, Ed, wrote several articles in the same paper about the history of the piano and record company in a effort to keep the memory of this company and his father’s part in it alive. However, Ed Kaeuper’s articles did not present much argument for the preservation or interpretation of the site.

⁷¹ “To Make No More Starr Pianos; Unprofitable, New Owners Say,” *Palladium-Item*, March 30, 1952, p2, newspapers.com, accessed February 5, 2021.

⁷² Cheryl Gibbs, “Auction Ended Piano Making,” *The Palladium-Item*, March 4, 1991, section C5, microfilm collection, Morrison Reeves Library in Richmond, Indiana.

⁷³ “Equipment at Starr Paint Is Put on Auction Block,” *Palladium-Item*, July 31, 1952, page 2, newspapers.com, accessed February 5, 2021.

Within months of Alpert auctioning off Starr Piano's equipment both Harry and Clarence Gennett passed away. Harry died on November 5, 1952, and Clarence on January 14, 1953. Harry's son, Harry Jr, who ran the sound effects company and continued to release those records passed away suddenly on May 24, 1957. Before his passing, he sold several Gennett Record artifacts, which included the recording ledger book, recording cards, and the remaining metal masters to Bill Grauer of Riverside Records. Whether that sale also included the sound recording copyrights remains a source of debate even though Riverside reissued many of the jazz sides on LP.

These transactions left Fred Gennett as the only real presence of the company's legacy in Richmond, but he possessed little interest in the recollection of Gennett Records' past. In a letter to George Kay, who was interested in documenting the history of the Gennett Record label in 1960, Fred wrote, "You're asking me for very much more than I would be willing to undertake. A recollection is a good thing, when it is understood when you are speaking in that manner, but to give you actual facts would require access to books and records which have not been preserved intact, and frankly I lack the interest to do so."⁷⁴ Fred passed away on November 27, 1964, at the age of seventy-eight.

Throughout the 1970s, most of the buildings in Starr Valley remained abandoned or used solely for purposes of storage. Photos taken by Historic American Engineering Record in 1968 showed the majority of the buildings in a state of severe disrepair with

⁷⁴ Fred Gennett Letter to George McKay, John McKenzie Collection, Indiana Historical Society, box 1, folder 4, Indianapolis, IN.

broken windows and collapsed roofs. Unable to attract new tenants, the ongoing vandalism, and the failure to sell the property to the city for use as a civic center, Alpert decided to auction Starr Valley to the highest bidder on October 28, 1976. Alpert cited his advanced age and the difficulty of managing the property from Indianapolis, some seventy-five miles away, noting that, “It was the vandalism we couldn’t keep up with.”⁷⁵ The advertisements placed by Alpert with the Kruse and Brantner Auction and Real Estate Agencies announced that the “Famous Starr Piano Factory” could be acquired and that the “Price may be less than one year’s rent elsewhere.”⁷⁶ Interestingly, Alpert highlighted the ‘fame’ of the site that remained ignored or dismissed; perhaps it was an attempt to elevate the price rather than advocate for the site’s historical value. Additionally, Edward Brantner replied to a *Palladium-Item* reporter’s question, “Who knows, the Shah of Iran might come or someone might want to make it into a piano museum,” when asked about the clientele possibly interested in the property.⁷⁷

While Brantner’s response included the idea of a piano museum could be viewed as flip or perhaps a way to expand the likely consumer base or interest the local population and government, it packs more of a punch. Brantner made no mention of the historical significance of the site’s role in popular music or the record label. His reply lacked any mention of Gennett Records, Louis Armstrong, Indiana’s favorite son, Hoagy

⁷⁵ “Starr Piano Land, Buildings Sold,” *Palladium-Item*, October 29, 1976, page 41, newspapers.com, accessed June 4, 2020.

⁷⁶ “The Famous Starr Piano Factory,” advertisement *Indianapolis Star*, October 10, 1976, page 67, newspapers.com, accessed June 4, 2020.

⁷⁷ “Starr Piano Plant Auction To Be Next Week On Premises,” *Palladium-Item*, October 21, 1976, page 35, newspapers.com, accessed June 4, 2020.

Carmichael, or one of the biggest movie stars, Gene Autry, in any of the advertising or publicity surrounding the auction. That speaks to the moment in time this auction took place, as no comparable site existed. Sun Studio served as either a plumbing or auto parts store in the 1970s. Stax went bankrupt and its building remained abandoned. No other recorded music history site had been preserved and interpreted by 1976. A year later, RCA Studio B announced its availability for tours to visitors Country Music Hall of Fame in 1977 before being donated in 1992. So it made sense that Brantner proffered the idea of a piano museum rather than one dedicated to the recorded music history, as museums dedicated to America's industrial past were more prevalent. For example, the Henry Ford Museum opened to the public in 1933.

A piano museum in Richmond possessed more impact to the local population, as families worked in the plant for two to three generations and the Starr Piano company operated before and after the record label and as the parent company to Gennett Records. Also, the local community at the time possessed little understanding of its importance when the buildings and property became available on the auction block. Nor beyond Brantner's off-handed reply to the local paper, did any serious discussions of museums or historical preservation manifest. The few remaining Gennett family members maintained a somewhat apathetic attitude. Mike Gennett, Fred Gennett's grandson, remarked that his grandfather never spoke of the piano or record company. It wasn't until historians like Rick Kennedy started to piece together the story and approach the remaining family

members, did he become aware of the historic significance of his family's legacy.⁷⁸ With no one championing for its preservation, this led to the eventual destruction of over ninety-percent of the built environment in Starr Valley.

⁷⁸ Conversation with author and Mike Gennett, November 13, 2019, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN.

- Chapter Three -

The Waltz You Saved for Me: The Preservation of Starr Valley, 1976 - 2022



Image 3: Interpretive Marker at site of Gennett Studios with the Logo Building in the background, photo by author.

Every dream with you I'll sway, dear
 To the Waltz you saved for me
 Every dream while I'm away, dear
 You'll hear this melody
 Whisper goodbye and gently say, dear
 That in all the days to be
 You will sometimes remember
 The Waltz you saved for me
 Ernie Golden and His Orchestra, "The Waltz You Saved for Me," 1931.⁷⁹

There was little action or interest evident on the day of the auction when the gavel finally struck and the auctioneer yelled "sold." Frank Robinson of Richmond purchased the twenty-five acre site for \$84,000. Both Brantner and Alpert thought the property would command a higher price and felt the ultimate sales price should reach \$120,000. To make matters even more grim for the already dilapidated site was Frank Robinson's uncertain use for what he just purchased. He expressed no plans for either the buildings or the land. Robinson remarked, "I don't know if I got a bargain or not."⁸⁰

The public auction of Starr Valley served as a catalyst to persuade citizens and officials to launch preservation efforts. At the same time Frank Robinson purchased the property in 1976, a concerted effort began of both the local government and Richmond

⁷⁹ Ernie Golden and His Orchestra, "The Waltz You Saved for Me," written by Wayne King, Emil Flint, and Gus Kahn, recorded on January 27, 1931, Champion 16195, 78 rpm.

⁸⁰ "Starr Piano Land, Buildings Sold," *Palladium-Item*, October 29, 1976, page 41, newspapers.com, accessed June 4, 2020.

citizens to preserve some aspect of the history of Starr and Gennett. One wonders, though, why the lack of an effort, even by the local government to acquire the property in the auction? While \$84,000 was not an inconsequential sum of money, it proved well below market value and probably less than these interests ended up spending campaigning and attempting to do something else with the buildings and the land.

While Frank Robinson remained unsure of his purchase, some locals including *Palladium-Item* journalist Ed Kaeuper, whose family worked at Starr Piano, began writing about the history of Starr Piano and Gennett Records. Additionally a small group of local citizens, including its number-one advocate, Al Gentry, began to make the case for the preservation and interpretation of the site. Gentry and the Society for the Preservation and Use of Resources (SPURS) started to explore possible public uses of the land. However, it failed in its bid on the property at the 1976 auction, as it only possessed \$75,000 a \$9,000 shortfall. SPURS “was formed to promote wise conservation for Wayne County as well as set up a program of beautification and utilization.”⁸¹ The organization sought to conserve as much open space as possible throughout the city.

Kaeuper’s weekly column in April 1977 focused primarily on the Gennett family and Starr Piano, including an impending threat to the Henry and Alice Gennett Mansion on Main Street, which at the time served as an apartment building. The mansion faced the wrecking ball to make way for a proposed supermarket. Thankfully, that building eventually fell into the friendly hands of Wayne Vincent, who renovated the home and

⁸¹ “Preservation, Use of Resources Is Goal of Newly-Formed Unit,” *Palladium Item*, January 22, 1967, p4, newspapers.com, accessed March 8, 2021.

claimed architectural significance as the reason to place it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.⁸² The two-page nomination contained only two sentences mentioning Henry Gennett's involvement in the piano and recording industry.

Kaeuper's second "Newsman's Notebook" in April 1977 turned the attention away from pianos to records, but only briefly. However, his focus remained trained on William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" recording in 1923 and the sound effects records. He made no mention of any of the jazz, blues, or country artists or the influential effect of those recordings on popular music. An interesting side note in the column recounted recent correspondence with George Blacker, who had commenced writing about inter-war record history and attempted a discography of Gennett Records. The rest of Kaeuper's column discussed some interesting non-piano or records sidelines, including the manufacture of billy clubs to break up union disturbances in the 1940s and propellers and valves for World War One aircraft.⁸³ Meanwhile, Robinson continued to seek tenants for the usable space, which included the 1917 concrete building at the far south end of the property while at the same time planning his exit strategy from the investment.

On April 3, 1977, Kaeuper's "Newman's Notebook," finally asked the million-dollar question of Robinson. What was his plan for the remaining Starr complex? Robinson observed that two or three of the buildings remained repairable and he planned

⁸² Dahan and Irmscher, *Images of America: Gennett Records and Starr Piano*, 121.

⁸³ Ed Kaeuper, "Newsman's Notebook: Propellers, Billy Clubs, Among Starr Products," *Palladium-Item*, April 17, 1977, p. 8, newspapers.com, accessed June 4, 2020.

on tearing down the rest with a salvage operation for the bricks. Robinson noted, “The two buildings to the north [one of which is the Logo Building] and south [The Concrete Building] are sound. The old office building [The Administration Building] near the north end of the property will probably get a second look.” He also teased the prospect of opening the buildings up for one last look by locals and those interested in the historic structures or to grab a souvenir.⁸⁴ Neither Kaeuper nor Robinson envisioned much of a future in the industrial complex. Additionally, the City of Richmond or any preservation groups did not possess the funds or infrastructure to intervene. Robinson planned to raze all but two of the remaining buildings with the studio building one of the targets for destruction. Patrick Steele, the regional preservation coordinator for the State of Indiana and Gertrude Ward of Old Richmond Inc., indicated an interest in preserving more buildings than Robinson indicated might not face the wrecking ball. A discussion of a transfer of some or all of the property from Robinson to the City of Richmond’s Parks & Recreation Department commenced, though Robinson believed this could be of more interest to them if he removed buildings that he viewed as liabilities.

⁸⁴ Ed Kaeuper, “Starr Co. Leader in Local Industry,” *Palladium-Item*, April 3, 1977, page 11, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

The Cross of Gold: The Thorny Crown of Starr Valley

The humblest citizen in all the land,
 When clad in the armor of a righteous cause,
 Is stronger than all the hosts of error.
 I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty.
 The cause of humanity.
 William Jennings Bryan, "The Cross of Gold," 1923.⁸⁵

A concerted effort to preserve some are all of the remaining buildings began in 1977, a year after Frank Robinson's acquisition. The City of Richmond with the Society for Preservation and Use of Resources (SPURS) and SPUR's president and head of the Chamber of Commerce's Gorge Committee, Al Gentry, applied for \$275,000 in federal grants to convert Starr Valley into green space. However, a stumbling block in this grant application, according to Barry Wood's *Palladium-Item* article "SPUR Announces River Park Funds Request," in September 1977, centered on the historic significance of the remaining buildings. These decaying buildings presented a potential barrier in the grant application. Gentry stated, "SPUR's position is that it's (the Starr property) in the floodplain and therefore not a good location for building in that respect. However, if there is some question about the historical significance of it, it will have to be dealt with another way."⁸⁶ It appeared that historic significance at large could prove a hindrance to

⁸⁵ William Jennings Bryan, "Cross of Gold," by William Jennings Bryan, recorded on July 2, 1923, Gennett Makers of History 40000, 78 rpm.

⁸⁶ Barry Wood, "SPUR Announces River Park Funds Request," *Palladium-Item*, September 29, 1977, page 3, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

any proposal for the conversion of Starr Valley into a park and green space rather than an asset.

Both Frank Robinson and the local preservationists acknowledged that a complete restoration of the remaining buildings could cost upwards of eight-million dollars. Even the local historical society possessed mixed feelings about saving some or all the buildings. Don Goodwell, president of Wayne County Historical Museum, noted that the organization maintained neither a pro nor anti-preservation opinion and that, “Some members don’t feel they’re [the buildings in Starr Valley] of great historical interest.”⁸⁷ Regardless the die was cast for a game of chicken, so to speak, between Robinson and the City of Richmond where the fate of the buildings and the transfer of property’s ownership were to be determined one way or another.

With the City of Richmond unable to gather funds to buy the Starr Piano site, Robinson began to tear down buildings, primarily those in the worst condition. The ongoing vandalism, a fire in March 1978, and the lack of a concrete offer from the city provided Robinson with the justification to demolish several buildings including the former lumber storage building adjacent to the Whitewater River and railroad spur that served as Gennett’s recording studio from 1921 to 1934. Former Starr Piano employee and preservation advocate Sam Meier observed, “The original acoustic studio, which

⁸⁷ Linda Monroe, “Should Starr Piano Buildings Be Saved?,” *Palladium-Item*, April 9, 1978, p. 1, Morrisson Reeves Library, accessed September 11, 2015.

sounded as magical as ever when I visited it in the early 70s, was torn down in 1979.”⁸⁸ Interestingly, the recording facility was not one of the buildings determined to possess historical significance at the time. In hindsight and through a twenty-first century lens, this building held the most historical value, even more than the late nineteenth century piano factory.

Robinson’s demolition efforts came to the public’s attention in April 1978 and caused a brief but concerted focus once again as to the fate of the property and its buildings. By then the *Palladium-Item* revealed more details of the ongoing struggle between Robinson and his public suitors. In addition to the interest expressed by the city, the *Palladium-Item* revealed that the SPURS organization possessed an option to purchase the entire complex for \$85,000 except for the two buildings Robinson targeted. Both the City of Richmond and Al Gentry noted the complex’s historical significance to the city of Richmond, but the remaining buildings contained within SPURS’ option were simply too far gone. SPURS ultimately declined to exercise its purchase option. Gentry noted, “We can’t buy them and tear them down. So we probably won’t buy them.” By no means did Gentry or SPURS favor any sort of razing of the remaining buildings but years of studying the cost of rehabilitation or adaptive reuse proved too large for a local organization to even fathom. Gentry also observed that without the buildings, the land

⁸⁸ Stuart Rosenberg, “Cradle of the Record Industry,” *Chicago Reader*, May 1, 1977, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/cradle-of-the-record-industry/Content?oid=893302>, accessed March 12, 2021.

still held historical significance to both the histories of Richmond and the National Road, which ran over Starr Valley.⁸⁹

Two points of note that are most interesting about this effort. First, the organizations attempting to acquire the property from Frank Robinson considered the National Register eligibility of some or all of the buildings in Starr Valley as a potential liability, not as a positive. Either this property was to become a historical landmark or cleared to make way for a park; a combination of both was not even considered or presented to the public. Money proved limited and in their opinion could not serve two endeavors on the same property. The federal funds, were for a park and green space, therefore buildings that were both a danger to the public and not of ‘historical significance’ were too dilapidated and expensive to rehabilitate. If the federal government determined that the remaining buildings were of historical significance, then those funds could not be acquired at the same time the City or Richmond planned to raze the historic buildings. A park remained within the realm of possibility with local, state, and federal money, but a historic site’s price tag remained several times higher.

Second, a series of *Palladium-Item* articles in 1977 and 1978 focused on the historical significance of the site and in the various community meetings both never elaborated on Starr Piano’s place in American History nor made any mention of Gennett Records. Not only did the record label never come up in these articles or community meetings, with the exception of William Jennings Bryan and his famous “Cross of Gold”

⁸⁹ Linda Monroe, “Should Starr Piano Buildings Be Saved?,” *Palladium-Item*, April 9, 1978, p. 1, Morrisson Reeves Library, accessed September 11, 2015.

Speech recorded in 1923, neither did any of the artists who recorded there and whose records Gennett pressed in the building now in front of the wrecker. However, in perspective, American music history, especially music made by African Americans and rural Southern whites, had yet come into any cultural focus. Scholarship was at best limited and minimal in the late 1970s. While many of the artists, such as Armstrong, Autry, Carmichael, and Welk ascended to international stardom and fame, music had yet become a part of America's mainstream historical fabric. The Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation applied for National Landmark status for Louis Armstrong's home in Queens, NY in 1976, one of the first such sites to receive that designation.⁹⁰ But there were no similar efforts for music company or record label sites to be similarly recognized after that. So one can understand the lack of its mention in the efforts in Richmond, Indiana, but if adopted might have attracted the interest of organizations outside of this small city in Eastern Indiana.

Eventually, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department agreed to purchase and develop the Starr Piano site in 1978 for use as a park with natural recreation, even possibly horseback riding, with geological and historic "points of interest." However the Parks Department opposed taking responsibility for the entire infrastructure with exception of the two buildings deemed most historic and somewhat salvageable at the time, the Administration building and the 1872 portion of one of the piano buildings at the eastern side of the property. Those two buildings were to remain

⁹⁰ "About," Louis Armstrong House Museum, website, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://www.louisarmstronghouse.org/about/>.

standing for two years at a minimum while the city determined possible adaptive reuses for them. But if none could be found, the City planned to raze them too. Gentry pessimistically noted, “We don’t attach insignificance to the buildings. We’re just saying it is impractical to try and use them.” The Parks and Recreation Department’s entire budget for the land acquisition and development hovered around \$275,000, half of which came from the City’s budget and the other half from a federal grant.⁹¹ The City of Richmond acquired the property save for two parcels reserved by Robinson with SPUR’s soon to be expiring option. SPUR secured the acquisition rights in March 1977 for \$15,000 in security funds through an interest-free loan to Robinson. The two parcels that remained with Robinson were the Concrete Building on the southern end and the Logo Building on the northern-most end. Both buildings were amongst the last structures built; Starr Piano built the Logo Building in 1910 with the Administration Building and the Concrete Building towards the end of the decade. The group also prepared a National Register for Historical Places nomination for the Administration building and the 1872 portion of a building on the eastern end by the Whitewater River.

With that conclusive decision, help wanted ads appeared in November in various local papers seeking “help in cleaning bricks and stacking lumber,” as Robinson retained demolition rights and the demolition commenced.⁹² Harry Leavell, a former Starr Piano

⁹¹ Steve Truitt, “Park in River Gorge OK’ed by City Board,” *Palladium-Item*, April 13, 1978, page 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

⁹² Help Wanted Ad, *Palladium-Item*, November 15, 1978, page 28, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

employee, recalls that Robinson took the reclaimed bricks from the demolished buildings and built his new house with the recycled material in Liberty, Indiana.⁹³

Through the end of 1978 and 1979 work progressed on clearing the Gorge of the most damaged buildings and the development of a hiking trail. In December 1979, the City of Richmond announced it was offering for sale or lease the Administration Building and its adjacent structure. Additionally, it nominated the structure for National Register of Historic Places consideration, emphasizing the architectural significance.

The historic significance of this building is questionable but the architectural significance is not. The building features a large, open staircase with an open balcony around the interior.

The structure was formerly the Administration Building for the Starr Piano Company and the Gennett Record Company. The original complex of seven (7) structures, which probably did not include the Administration Building, is the site where Hoagy Carmichael originally recorded “Stardust.”

The structure is in the process of being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. It is part of the Starr industrial complex and is one of several buildings which has been vacant for many years. All of the glass has been broken and some of the brick cornices have been removed. The roof is in various stages of deterioration; however most of the interior has not suffered weathering. Structural integrity appears good.⁹⁴

With such a warts and all description of the property, it is no wonder no takers attempted to purchase or lease the building. In 1980, the Parks and Recreation Department through the Richmond City Planning Department submitted its National Register of Historic Places nomination. Daniel Dooley, who prepared the nomination form primarily focused

⁹³ “Harry Leavell Remembers...” document from Laurel Gennett Martin’s personal collection.

⁹⁴ “Legal Notice,” *Palladium-Item*, December 12, 1979, page 19, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

on the architectural significance of the Administration building but also checked the following boxes in the areas of significance: archeology-historic, industry, invention, and music. The one-page narrative reviewed the history of Starr Piano and Gennett Records. In the document's final paragraph, Dooley summarized Gennett Records.

The real significance of Starr came in 1915 with the development of the recording industry. Starr was one of the first companies to promote folk music, hillbilly, and spirituals. Many early musicians traveled to Richmond to record for Starr Records under the Gennett label. These artists include Hoagy Carmichael, Gene Autry, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong. In 1919, William Jennings Bryan came to Richmond and recorded his famous "Cross of Gold" speech.⁹⁵ Gennett was possibly the first commercial recording concern to enter the ethnic field. In 1926, the first portable recording equipment, developed by Starr, accompanied Dr. J. Walter Fewkes of the Smithsonian Institute to record the music of the Hopi Indians.⁹⁶

Within a year of the nomination, in August of 1981, the United States Department of the Interior Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service placed both the Administration and the 1872 Warehouse buildings on the eastern bank of the Whitewater River in the National Register of Historic Places inventory. The nomination listed the Logo Building, which is across the street from the Administration Building, as a non-contributing structure. At the time, Robinson still owned the Logo Building and possessed no interest in a National Register nomination. The City of Richmond Parks and Recreation and SPUR possessed no interest in bearing the expense or effort to preserve anymore than absolutely deemed necessary by any historical review. James M.

⁹⁵ The correct date of this recording session is July 2, 1923.

⁹⁶ Daniel Dooley, "Starr Piano Company Warehouse and Administration Building," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, June 6, 1980, https://secure.in.gov/apps/dnr/shaard/r/1d5d1/N/Starr_Piano_CO_Admin_Bldg_Wayne_CO_Nom.pdf, accessed September 9, 2015.

Ridenour the Indiana State Historic Preservation officer noted, “The buildings are significant because they are the last vestiges of what was Richmond’s earliest industrial area.”⁹⁷

Between the 1980 nomination and the 1981 listing, however, the City of Richmond authorized the local fire department to conduct a controlled burn down and training exercise using part of one of the Starr Piano buildings. Tim Ryder, of the Community Development Committee noted that the City authorized the fire to “eliminate an expense to the taxpayer.” The City of Richmond also posed the fire training exercise as a way to celebrate the anticipated release of the Iranian hostages that caused many locals to attend and cheer the fire and collapse of one of the Starr Piano structures.⁹⁸ The historic designation and the celebratory building burning proved to be beginning of a lull and stall in any development of Starr Piano property for almost twenty years. During those years, illegal trash and refuse dumping, graffiti, and other acts of vandalism intensified.

The listing of the Administration and Warehouse buildings in the National Register failed to generate positive momentum towards preservation and interpretation.⁹⁹ As the owner of the Concrete Building and the Logo Building, Frank Robinson continued to seek occupants though did not make any effort to rehabilitate or update the structures.

⁹⁷ “County Report: Buildings on Historic Register,” *Palladium-Item*, August 2, 1981, p. B6, Morrison Reeves archive, accessed September 11, 2015.

⁹⁸ Al Hunter, “A ‘Bonfire’ Dedicated to Hostages,” *Palladium-Item*, January 19, 1981, p. 15, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

⁹⁹ Ed Kaeuper, “Starr Piano Co., A Golden Oldie,” *Palladium-Item*, March 23, 1983, p. 101, newspapers.com, accessed February 12, 2021.

Al Gentry reiterated the previous vision held by SPUR and the Richmond Parks and Recreation Department that the remaining non-historic structures, the Administration and the 1872 Warehouse buildings, be leveled and the property turned into a park or sports fields. Again, the original deal allowed for a two year window to find a suitable use and funding for the two National Register properties before both could be razed. Meanwhile, both suffered neglect from lack of any effort to stabilize or rehabilitate either. However, Frank Robinson in 1983 acknowledged that some were interested in the musical history of the property: “I’ve given away a lot of bricks to them [jazz enthusiasts]. One jazz fan wanted part of an old window frame. I took it apart and put it in his car.”¹⁰⁰ That level of support proved too little to move preservation efforts forward.

While the buildings in Starr Valley remained in limbo, Wayne Vincent acquired the Henry and Alice Gennett Mansion, which the former Starr Piano president had built on East Main Street about a mile from the factory. Preservation efforts by Wayne Vincent succeeded. Vincent rehabilitated the dwelling to its stately presence from what it had become, an apartment building for single women. The renovated mansion served as the headquarters for Vincent’s World Life and Accident Insurance Company. Vincent applied for and received National Register for Historic Places status in the latter half of 1983. The preservation of the Gennett mansion did not move the company’s music history forward. Henry Gennett had little to nothing to do with Starr Piano’s expansion into the recording field in 1915 and he passed away in 1922, just before the label operations made

¹⁰⁰ Ed Kaeuper, “Starr Piano Co., A Golden Oldie,” *Palladium-Item*, March 23, 1983, p. 101, newspapers.com, accessed February 12, 2021.

its mark. Vincent, however, highlighted Henry Gennett's connection to the company's musical history in his application, as well as Alice Lumsden Gennett's role on the company board after her husband's death. "The company entered the recording business in 1915 under the Starr label. The label was soon changed to Gennett, and became famous for its recordings of Bix Beiderbecke, Hoagy Carmichael, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Gene Autry."¹⁰¹

In October of 1983, right after the Gennett Mansion's National Register placement, James Dapogny, a music professor at the University of Michigan, and *Palladium-Item* reporter, Rick Kennedy, began to make a stronger case for some level of preservation effort. Ten years after this article, Kennedy authored the definitive biography of Gennett Records entitled *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy: Gennett Studios and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* for Indiana University Press. Both Dapogny, who was in town to perform at Earlham College, and Kennedy acknowledged the likely outcome for the buildings. "'Even when everything is gone, people will want to know where these musicians played and recorded,' he said while standing in the rubble. 'Many important people passed through this place.'" Kennedy also noted Frank Robison's intention to save part of one of the buildings exterior walls, as it contained a painting of a Gennett logo.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ "Henry and Alice Gennett House," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, July 13, 1983, United States Department of the Interior / National Park Service, accessed March 3, 2021.

¹⁰² Rick Kennedy, "Music Greats Recorded Here: Jazz Days Are Recalled While Starr Is Falling," *Palladium-Item*, October 23, 1983, p. 2, Morrison-Reeves Library collection, accessed September 11, 2015.

How Firm a Foundation: The Birth of the Starr-Gennett Foundation

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
 My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.
 The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
 Thy dross to consume, thy dross to consume,
 Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.
 Dye's Sacred Harp Singers, "How Firm a Foundation," 1928.¹⁰³

In 1985, Al Gentry and Bill Delk ran into each other on a downtown Richmond street and began to discuss new ways to inform local residents about the history of the Starr Piano and Gennett Record Company. Local businessman Bill Delk served on both the Richmond - Wayne County Chamber of Commerce and its Whitewater Gorge Park Committee. Delk owned both the Sparkle Car Wash and Connie's House of Marker Restaurant. Al Gentry, who had been instrumental in SPUR's efforts to acquire the Starr Piano property in the late 1970s, was a Colonel in the United States Army in the 1980s and 1990s after his retirement from full-time service. He worked as an industrial engineer at Cooper Industries / Belden Wire and Cable Company in Richmond. In January 1985, both men along with other supporters decided to promote a concert and organize a Starr Piano and Gennett Records employee reunion. They hoped the event would attract interest from outside Wayne County, and reignite a local discussion about how best to preserve, interpret, and celebrate the property's history.

¹⁰³ Dye's Sacred Harp Singers, "How Firm a Foundation," by traditional, recorded on December 14, 1928, Gennett 6889, 78 rpm.

In March, the Whitewater Valley Gorge Park Committee announced that the “Once There Was Music - A Jazz Festival” would be held in mid-May. The committee announced a likely line-up of jazz artists and an employee reunion. It also requested any memorabilia related to “the Starr-Gennett era of music in Richmond,” though made no mention of where it intended to house or display these new acquisitions.¹⁰⁴ As the committee revealed more about its plans regarding the festival, it also began to float the idea of a museum dedicated to the history of Starr Piano and Gennett Records and that the proceeds from the jazz festival was to be for the benefit of its establishment. It was during the time between the announcement of the festival and the event itself, that the Gorge Park Committee formed the Starr-Gennett Preservation Project with Al Gentry as its chair. Gentry outlined a five-year plan with three goals.¹⁰⁵

1. Establish archives of the Starr-Gennett history. Progress has already begun on this - gleaning documents, company records, photographs, and oral histories “while they are still available.” Cooperation of Indiana University has already been obtained to store and catalog material as it is acquired. An attempt is being made to acquire the extensive materials now housed at UCLA in California which includes part of the Gennett files along with record masters and recordings.
2. Prepare the Starr-Gennett site property and establish the ‘Village Green’ concept of development. At present, the Richmond Park Department owns all the site except two of the buildings.

¹⁰⁴ “Gorge Park Committee Plans May Jazz Festival,” *Palladium-Item*, March 31, 1985, page 9, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Cover of the “Images of Time Souvenir Issue,” *Palladium-Item*, June 16, 1985, Morrison Reeves Library Starr-Gennett files, box 6, accessed September 11, 2015.

3. Create a design and begin planning a museum on the site to house the archives and provide a source for study and research by scholars of recorded music of the Gennett era in Richmond ‘where it all began.’¹⁰⁶

Additionally, Gentry’s long-range master plan had three priorities. (1) “Push ahead on the ‘Village Green’ concept for the long neglected Starr site;” (2) “Develop a working replica of the Gennett recording studio for the museum, possible to be housed in the old ‘1872 building;’” (3) “Restore the old Gennett sign on the existing north brick building as a separate monument or as part of the museum.”¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸

The jazz festival commenced on the evening of May 14 with a reunion of almost one-hundred former employees at the Richmond High School. Henry Martin, son of Rose Gennett Martin, with his wife Laurel and Linda Gennett Irmischer, the granddaughter of Harry Gennett and the daughter of Harry Gennett Jr, who ran Gennett’s sound effects division, also attended. Both women had impactful roles later in the efforts to preserve and disseminate the history of Starr and Gennett.

Duncan Schiedt, a noted jazz scholar, photographer, and author of *The Jazz State of Indiana*, addressed the crowd, before the concert at the Tiernan Center, a seven-thousand seat auditorium attached to the high school, one of the largest in the United States. In addition to performances by noted jazz musicians Jeff Hamilton, Harold Jones, and Andy Simpkins, all of whom possessed ties to Richmond, a former Gennett recording

¹⁰⁶ “Vision or Reality? Whitewater Valley Gorge Committee Has Great Hopes for Starr-Gennett Project as Spur to Long-Range Plans,” *Palladium-Item Images of Time* Souvenir Issue, June 16, 1985, p. 13, author’s collection.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ This is the “Logo Building” that was not in the National Register inventory.

artist, Syd Valentine, sat in with the above combo for four tunes. Cornetist Syd Valentine had recorded in Richmond on October 2, 1929, with his Patent Leather Kids. The *Palladium-Item* reported that over 4,100 people purchased tickets to the concert, which more than made up for the \$4,000 that needed to be raised to break-even. Additionally, Henry Martin, who served as the president of Refrigeration Supplies Distribution (RSD), formerly Starr Freeze, in California, presented the foundation with a \$3,000 donation earmarked for the museum fund.¹⁰⁹

The success of the 1985 concert and reunion weekend led to the organization the Second Annual Jazz Festival on May 13, 1986. The Starr Gennett Preservation Fund Committee hired trumpeter “Wild Bill” Davison, who had recorded with the Chubb-Steinberg Orchestra in Richmond in February, April, July, and October in 1925. After his time as a member of the Chubb-Steinberg Orchestra, Davison became best known as the bandleader for Eddie Condon for three decades, in addition to his work as a bandleader and recordings with Sidney Bechet, Art Hodes, and Pee Wee Russell. Also featured on the bill was local jazz drummer Harold Jones, who never recorded for Gennett, but became a known and respected musician in jazz circles for his time in the Count Basie Orchestra.¹¹⁰

The Starr Gennett Preservation Fund committee held a fifty-dollar a plate dinner the night before, featuring Davison, at the Radisson Hotel. At that event, Gentry outlined

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Kurp, “Festival Debuts in ‘Jazz Capital,’” *Palladium-Item*, May 15, 1985, page 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 3, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Pete Sullivan, “‘Birthplace of Recorded Jazz’ Decays as Drive to Preserve Memory Grows,” *Palladium-Item*, May 8, 1986, p.B5, newspapers.com, accessed June 8, 2022.

his vision for how these funds and others were to be used in commemoration of the Gennett Records story.

I envision a Gennett Jazz Hall of Fame displaying jazz artists who recorded for Gennett. We're reluctant to call it a museum. We simply want to call it an archive, a living activity, and we may locate it in Gorge Park, depending on the funding. For the building, we're looking at five to ten years. For the time being we'd like to develop the archives. That is the most critical thing. Eventually we want something tangible to look at.¹¹¹

The program for the event offered a more expansive presentation of ideas for the future of the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund's activities and the Gorge.

The festival will help contribute to efforts underway to establish a comprehensive archives of original recordings, publications, records, and recording devices dating back to the days when music filled the gorge. The goal is to build a working museum on the site of the original Gennett Recording studio, a center for the study of that historic era, a place where students can learn about those phenomenal musical days and visitors can appreciate a grand musical heritage on the spot where it began.¹¹²

While the original 1985 concert drew over 4,000 paid attendees, the 1986 event barely drew six-hundred people, despite the high profile headliner. The poor attendance ended what Al Gentry had envisioned as an annual event. But within a year, the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund decided to present a thirty-five million dollar proposal for a museum and education center, a performance space, and a park in the Gorge.

¹¹¹ Alan Ross, "Richmond Jazz Fest to Help Save Past," *Palladium-Item*, May 11, 1986, p.40, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

¹¹² "2nd Annual Richmond Jazz Festival '86" Program, p.2, Starr Gennett Preservation Fund, Richmond, Indiana, author's collection.

In 1986, the City of Richmond had begun efforts gain the “All-American City” recognition from the National Civic League.¹¹³ Essential in the Richmond Area Chamber of Commerce’s committee’s efforts included the highlights of Richmond’s past and history with a focus on the Starr Piano and Gennett Records history. Thus the chamber opened the door for a revised proposal for the “Development of the historic Whitewater River Gorge, the Starr-Gennett Recording Studio area preservation project and Richmond Jazz Festival.”¹¹⁴ Committee member, Bill Delk, who later played a major role in the development of the Starr-Gennett Foundation in the 2000s, noted that whether the All-American City designation occurred or not, it still possessed a positive effect on the city’s self-evaluation and progress in its goals to improve.¹¹⁵ Richmond earned this designation in 1987, leading the committee and other civic leaders and organizations continued to seek ways to best preserve and interpret the Starr Gennett story.

In 1988, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department, ramped up its focus on Starr Valley. It appointed Garret Boone, an artist in residence and former Art professor at Earlham College, the Gorge’s design director. Boone’s vision included “expanded biking paths and a rail transportation link stretching from the Starr-Gennett area - located between Main and G Street bridges - and Springwood Park” and focused on clearing most of the remaining buildings and creating park and green space. The

¹¹³ “About National Civic League,” <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/mission-and-vision/>, accessed March 20, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Emmett Smelser, “Teamwork Is What Will Win All-American Title,” *Palladium-Item*, July 20, 1986, p13, newspapers.com, accessed March 24, 2021.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Parks and Recreation department agreed to fund \$30,000 of its design as long as the community or another source matched those funds. Additionally, it applied for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and agreed to hire an outside architectural firm to build upon Boone's design.¹¹⁶

With Boone's design as a starting point and the necessary funds raised, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department hired the Ft. Wayne, Indiana-based architectural firm, Morrison, Kattman, and Associates to fully develop, design, and present a plan for the Gorge. Some of the highlights from its initial presentation included an amphitheater centered at the site of the Gennett Recording facility in the Starr Piano complex, the preservation of the Logo Building and/or the Concrete Building for special events, the development of a commercial area towards the Main Street entrance for future businesses and restaurants, and a trolley service from the Gorge to Springwood Lake Park.¹¹⁷ The Morrison, Kattman, and Associates firm presented its plan at several open meetings to gauge the community's reaction and gather its input.

The community meetings drew large crowds. The initial feedback gathered at both the June and July meetings suggested a small museum at the train station, not in the Gorge, and grounds to facilitate camping and fossil collection. Discussions became animated concerning whether to preserve the Concrete Building and convert it into a

¹¹⁶ Darryl L. Bego, "Park Board Votes For Gorge Project," *Palladium-Item*, October 13, 1988, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Darryl L. Bego, "Annual Pool Pass Prices Cut 10%," *Palladium-Item*, June 15, 1989, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed March 24, 2021.

events pavilion, or tear it down all together. Its condition, size, and cost to preserve it proved too high a barrier to be overcome.¹¹⁸

In August the Morrison, Kattman, and Associates presented its final seven-million dollar proposal to improve, preserve, and develop the Gorge. The architectural firm's proposal broke the effort down into six distinct phases with each phase averaging a little over one-million dollars.

Phase One calls for the preparation of the park spaces, which would include cleaning up refuse and removing the current park maintenance building.

Phase Two would include dam and bank repairs.

Phase Three would make improvements to trails, bicycle paths, and jogging trails.

Phase Four calls for renovating the brick Gennett building,¹¹⁹ constructing an amphitheater, and clearing the "knoll" for restaurants, boutiques, and gift shops.

Phase Five would install a trolley system from the Starr-Gennett area to Springwood Lake.

Phase Six calls for rehabilitating the concrete Starr Piano building.¹²⁰

This proposal endorsed earlier suggestions to locate a small jazz museum at the train station and to dedicate a section of the Gorge to camping and fossil collection. But the proposal failed to mention any synergy with earlier the proposal developed by the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund. While it shared in the vision for a performance space with an

¹¹⁸ Darryl L. Bego, "Park Board Looks at New Gorge Plan," *Palladium-Item*, July 7, 1989, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

¹¹⁹ The brick building mentioned here is the "Logo Building."

¹²⁰ Darryl L. Bego, "Gorge Park Proposal Would Cost \$7 Million," *Palladium-Item*, August 10, 1989, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

outdoor amphitheater, the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund's concept possessed a more year-round venue. Additionally, the Morrison, Kattman proposal made no mention of what would go in the rehabilitated concrete building. The architectural firm's proposal lacked a dedication to the history of what occurred in the Gorge. While the Parks Department viewed the proposal as favorable, Garret Boone expressed utter dissatisfaction without being specific about it.

The firm's final proposal submitted in December consolidated the earlier draft and public input into a four-phase proposal that included all of the previous elements but added a pedestrian bridge across the Whitewater River to connect the area around the Richmond High School and the Gorge and estimated a three-million dollar expense just for the rehabilitation of the Concrete Building. After paying the firm \$52,000 for its work, the Parks and Recreation Board used the final plan to apply for a \$3.5 million dollar grant from the Build Indiana Fund.¹²¹

In 1989, the Wayne County Historical Museum opened an exhibition dedicated to the Whitewater River Gorge, Starr Piano, and Gennett Records. The museum possessed many artifacts it collected and purchased when Alpert held an auction upon the closing of the piano factory in the 1950s and subsequent years of local citizens and Gennett family members donating others. The museum never showed much interest or support for restoring the Starr Piano buildings but its exhibit on Starr Piano and Gennett Records remained the only publicly available interpretation for the company's history for several

¹²¹ Deborah Lansky, "Gorge Book Has New Look," *Palladium-Item*, December 14, 1989, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed March 24, 2021.

decades. Interestingly, the museum exhibits did include the Garret Boone renderings for the Whitewater Gorge effort undertaken by the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department.

I Had You - I Lost You - I Found You: Starr-Gennett's Preservation Lost and Found

You came back to me for a while
Then left me again with a smile
I had you, I lost you, I found you,
Only to lose you again.

Paige Specialty Orchestra, "I Had You - I Lost You - I Found You," 1926.¹²²

The 1990s proved to be a step back for the preservation of the Starr-Gennett property. Several of the buildings collapsed; the property lost its National Register of Historic Places historic designation, funding and cohesive plans failed to materialize, and the Gennett family members became disillusioned and left the preservation efforts.

A key factor in the decade's problems were the buildings owned by Frank Robinson. Whether the Parks and Recreation Department moved forward with the Morrison, Kattman or the Garret Boone proposal, if any at all, remained secondary to gaining total control of the Gorge property. The Parks and Recreation Department voted at its January 1990 meeting to proceed with negotiations but to cap the offer at \$10,000. Additionally, after a few minor edits, "The Board approved the final draft of a booklet

¹²² Paige Specialty Orchestra, "I Had You - I Lost You - I Found You," by Max C. Freedman, Tom Kelly, and Don Traveline, recorded on May 21, 1926, Gennett 3327, 78 rpm.

[the Morrison, Kattman proposal] promoting the proposed \$8 million dollar Whitewater Gorge Park project...it will be sent with grant applications to help fund the project, including a \$3.5 million dollar request from the Build Indiana Fund.”¹²³

The negotiations between the Richmond Parks and Recreation Department and Frank Robinson quickly grew contentious. The Parks and Recreation Department hired local real estate firm, Lingle Real Estate, to appraise the Robinson property. When Lingle arrived at a \$20,000 valuation, the Parks and Recreation department raised its budget to \$30,000 for Robinson’s two buildings and six acres. Robinson rejected the offer and threatened to raze the remaining buildings. The Parks and Recreation Department then authorized eminent domain proceedings. Robinson told the *Palladium-Item* on April 12, 1990, he will still refuse to sell if the court’s appraiser came in under his appraiser’s valuation.¹²⁴

The Richmond Parks and Recreation Department’s pursuit of the Build Indiana grant proved successful, but the city only received \$1.5 million, an amount the state refused to release due to a recession and an underperforming lottery.

While the gears of government slowly ground, the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund, now the Starr Gennett Foundation, aligned itself with other organizations, including Earlham College, Indiana University East, and various government agencies to present jazz concerts both in the outdoor Gorge Park and other indoor venues. In 1991,

¹²³ Deborah Lansky, “Park Board to Negotiate for Gorge Land,” *Palladium-Item*, January 11, 1990, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

¹²⁴ Deborah Lansky, “Richmond Seeking Gorge Land,” *Palladium-Item*, April 12, 1990, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

the Starr-Gennett Foundation co-promoted a concert with Ramsey Lewis and Cheryl Berdell just north of the Gennett property in the Whitewater Gorge. Concerts such as the Ramsey Lewis show proved an interest in public outdoor musical events and the Foundation and others in the city hoped soon could be presented at the planned amphitheater. In May, Chuck Martin, a local advocate for preservation told the newspaper:

It is not a thing that happened very suddenly. Interest comes and goes, but each time a little bit more is accomplished. If you had told me twenty-five years ago that we'd be as far as we are today, I would have said you are crazy. On one hand it's been discouraging over the years trying to keep people interested in it. On the other hand, there's been a rather amazing amount accomplished. Most people in town now view the Gorge as an asset. He's [Al Gentry] is the spark plug. It has been his dream for twenty-five years. It's an idea whose time has come. We've had some problems. M-O-N-E-Y is the big one. If you know anyone with a million dollars, we'd be glad to make a park bench with a plaque with their name on it. But one thing is for sure, it isn't going to die.¹²⁵

Martin's observations prove salient and true for many music-based preservation projects, or preservation projects as a whole, especially when it relies so much on local engagement, especially where economic prospects are either negative or stagnant at best, like in Richmond, Indiana.

In February 1993, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department and Frank Robinson arrived at an out-of-court settlement as the condemnation and eminent domain issues worked its way through the legal system. The City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department agreed to pay Robinson's company, Robfam, a total of \$58,000

¹²⁵ Samantha Shook, "Gorge Is Now Seen As Asset," *Palladium-Item*, May 26, 1991, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 20, 2021.

for both parcels of land that contained the Concrete Building and the Logo Building. But almost as soon as the two parties settled and finalized the property transfer, the Logo Building caught fire in September. Due to the isolation of the site and its location in a valley, the fire, most likely set by the omnipresent vagrants, burned for several hours before its detection. When the firefighters arrived, it took over three hours to extinguish the blaze, which gutted the Logo Building, leaving only the exterior walls for the first two floors, exposed steel beams, and the six story stairwell. The Gennett logo on the exterior elevator shaft wall remained intact. Garret Boone noted that what remained was “as functional as what was there before. I hope every effort is made to salvage what is left.”¹²⁶ But others used the fire as a full-stop. What had been settled business was now reopened especially since the damage meant that the \$1.5 million in funds from Build Indiana did not come close to covering the costs.

The Richmond Parks and Recreation Department determined to stabilize the Logo Building, since that cost was merely \$2,600 more than the cost of razing it and removing the debris. The board estimated the stabilization cost at \$17,600, which included the cost to remove the fire debris, the repair of the loose and missing bricks in the tower, the placement of a new roof on the tower, and the erection an eight-foot chain link fence with barbed wire around the Logo Building.¹²⁷ Eventually, the Logo Building needed an additional \$40,000 to completely stabilize it and make it safe, which did not include any

¹²⁶ Ann M. Gynn, “Officials Check Damage at Charred Piano Factor,” *Palladium-Item*, September 14, 1993, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed March 1, 2021.

¹²⁷ Samantha Shook, “Cost of Saving vs. Razing Starr-Gennett is Extra \$2,600,” *Palladium-Item*, September 28, 1993, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed February 19, 2021

restoration. Again, the energy rightfully placed into the pressing matter of how to best recover from the setback of the fire proved a costly distraction. Even the *Palladium-Item*'s editorial board strongly wavered on its long term position of pro-preservation efforts. "If the city can't afford to save all or some parts of the buildings it should go ahead and tear them down before someone gets seriously hurt - or worse." The editorial board then concluded, "The board must take stock now and see what, if anything, can be preserved with the resources the city has - not what it might get someday from the state . . . There comes a time in every project when decisions must be made - no matter who doesn't like it. That time is now for the Starr-Gennett buildings."¹²⁸

Ultimately, the fire proved a mixed blessing. On the positive side, the city raised funds to stabilize and repurpose the Logo Building into an adaptively reused structure. It accomplished this through a mail fundraising campaign to local citizens. A local fundraising campaign netted more than \$15,000 for the stabilization. Other citizens donated their time, materials, and items to auction to raise more funds. Local businesses donated food and firewood to give to people who trekked down into the Gorge and aided in the clean-up effort. On the negative side, this effort placed into the Logo Building's future ended any forward progression on the remainder of the property and the vision for a historic park. In the minds of the people of Richmond it felt as if this effort was enough. While there were some financial victories in store in the next year, the effort depended on a few driven locals with no outside organizations offering to pitch in. New

¹²⁸ Editorial Board, "Gorge Buildings Must Be Made Safe or Destroyed," *Palladium-Item*, September 21, 1993, p. 6, newspapers.com, accessed March 26, 2021.

Richmond arrival and managing editor of the *Palladium-Item* Evan Miller observed, “In the three weeks I have lived in Richmond, I’ve heard more than once that the city is held back by apathy.”¹²⁹ Additionally, there was confusion about who held ultimate responsibility for the Logo Building, the park, and financing its progress: the City of Richmond, the Gorge Committee, or the Starr-Gennett Foundation. Several plans for the Gorge remained in circulation with no one concept rising to the top or offered as a cohesive vision.

Also missing from the discussions about the future of the park was a decision on the future of the two National Register of Historic Places listed buildings; the Administration Building and the 1872 Warehouse Building. Perhaps the deteriorated state of both and the monies both required to, if nothing else, stabilize, proved too much for anyone’s consideration. Only Garret Boone’s proposal recommended that the 1872 Warehouse be stabilized and serve as an adornment for the amphitheater stage. The Morrison, Kattman proposal only recommended the incorporation of the building’s foundations into the amphitheater stage. Due to the deterioration of the buildings the National Parks Service removed both from the National Register on May 1, 1995. Paul Diebold of the Indiana State Historic Preservation Office recalls, “The [Administration] building was demolished. Well, except for one wall. When historic places no longer have any of the physical characteristics for which it was listed, we ask that they be

¹²⁹ Evan Miller, “Take Advantage of Publicity from Gennett Book,” *Palladium-Item*, May 8, 1994, p. 12, newspapers.com, accessed February 19, 2021.

removed from the National Register. It's a real shame, too, because of the great things that happened in that place."¹³⁰

One of the major issues confronting the argument for preservation lie in the lack of a cohesive historical and cultural argument. While many academic articles and periodic local paper feature extolled and attempted to contextualize the Starr Piano and Gennett Records story, it was sporadic, difficult to find, and incomplete once gathered by anyone with an interest in academic journals, microfilm, and odd-ball record collecting periodicals. The other major problem lie in that the local preservationists focused almost exclusively on Gennett's place in jazz history. While Gennett's place as a ground-breaking jazz record label is secure, jazz had become academic at best in the latter part of the twenty-first century. Few Richmond citizens possessed any meaningful connection to jazz. Jazz records no longer sold in any significant number, and whether for the good or bad, it became music of the academy, high-brow, even. Quite the change from the 1920s, when society viewed it as the very opposite. Gennett Records' place in the history of blues and country music, two influential genres very much a part of the lingua franca of contemporary music, was not well-known. But those two genres reach across generational barriers and there were easily drawn lines of lineage from contemporary popular music to that recorded at Gennett several decades prior.

As an example of the shift in scholarship, former *Palladium-Item* journalist, Rick Kennedy's definitive *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Studios and the Birth of*

¹³⁰ Email with author March 11, 2016.

Recorded Jazz focused largely on the history of jazz, but included a thorough history of the founding of Starr Piano in Richmond, and a few chapters dedicated to Gennett's other landmark recordings, specifically blues and country. Kennedy, in a revised 2013 edition, expanded upon the country and blues recording history and altered the title to *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots*. Almost twenty years later, the book finally provided the first readily available cohesive narrative history and statement of cultural importance of both Starr Piano and Gennett Records. However, Kennedy offered only an expanded history and largely ignored the local preservation efforts.¹³¹ A few months after the release of Kennedy's book, the State of Indiana released \$200,000 of the \$1.5 million dollars promised to the effort in the Gorge. Additionally, the Rails-to-Trails Project, which focused on the adjacent abandoned CSX rail line, awarded the Richmond Parks and Recreation Department \$500,000, asking only for a plan to how those funds would be allocated. Ultimately, the City referred to the Morrison, Kattman 1991 proposal that it funded as the basis for how to appropriate these funds. But this confusion about a cohesive master plan raged on for the next few years, often vacillating between the Morrison, Kattman and the Garret Boone proposals with new voices adding more revisions and concepts. This ongoing discussion simply furthered delayed final decisions; twenty-five years had passed since the development and preservation of the Gorge began in earnest.

¹³¹ Rick Kennedy. *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Studios and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 210.

The Old Family Album at Home: The Gennett Family Returns

There is a world of affection,
With each recollection,
Of the old family album at home.
The Lombards, "The Old Family Album at Home," 1928.¹³²

A Christmas card sent by family friend, Richmond citizen, and former Starr Piano employee, Harry Leavell reached Rose Gennett Martin in 1994 and spurred her daughter-in-law Laurel Gennett Martin to organize and lead the Gennett family back to Richmond.¹³³ Her husband, Henry Gennett Martin had recently passed away and she organized a Gennett family reunion in the Gennett Mansion on Main Street. In addition to reconnecting family from all four corners of the United States, Laurel Martin desired to teach the family about its place in American history and culture. Martin organized a dinner that included a jazz concert and presentation by Andrew Klein. Martin remarked, "He'll be telling the Gennetts about themselves." The following day, Martin organized tours of the Gorge and Wayne Count Historical Museum. She also scheduled meetings with the family and local civic leaders, including Garret Boone and Sam Meier. They discussed the efforts in preserving the Starr-Gennett legacy in both the city and in the Gorge. Martin further observed, "We [the Gennett descendants] need to come back and have an interest in the city where it all began."¹³⁴ Soon after, the Starr-Gennett

¹³² The Lombards, "The Old Family Album at Home," by unknown, recorded on February 27, 1928, Silvertone 8309, 78 rpm.

¹³³ Laurel Martin interview with author February 9, 2017.

¹³⁴ Rachel Shelley, "Gennett Family Reuniting in City," *Palladium-Item*, October 19, 1995, p. 16, newspapers.com, accessed April 2, 2021.

Preservation Fund, which soon became the Starr-Gennett Foundation, asked Martin to head its effort and bring together the disparate parties into a cohesive unit. This development represented the first time that the preservation effort enlisted someone from outside the community that included not only the Gennett Family, but access to private funding from beyond the Richmond city limits. Martin grew up in California, and except for a brief period when her husband, Henry Martin, apprenticed with his uncle, Henry Gennett, in the piano business, she never lived in Richmond. Her side of the Gennett family moved to California and turned the Starr Freeze business into the successful RSD, Inc, which supplied refrigeration parts in over a dozen states.

In 1996, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation department developed another proposal spurred by the requirements of the Rails-to-Trails grant. It hired Claire Bennett and Associates to update previous proposals by incorporating a trail program. Claire Bennett and Associates endorsed the outdoor amphitheater, a museum dedicated to Richmond's industrial and musical history, and retail shops, but emphasized trail development. The money from Build Indiana (now \$400,000 of the original \$1.5 million), Rails-to-Trails, and another \$55,000 from private donors was earmarked to build the trails with the hope that this progress could attract new private funding. Mike Higbee, of Claire Bennett and Associates advised, "There is no reason why you can't take this history, package it up, and market it nationally."¹³⁵ In other words, the local effort could focus on the beautification of the area and development of the trails, but to fund the

¹³⁵ Ann M. Gynn, "Carving Out a Future; Master Plan Marks 'Defining Moment' for Gorge," *Palladium-Item*, March 8, 1996, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 2, 2021.

rest of the proposal for the Starr-Gennett site, outside money was needed. Garret Boone saw possibilities in the new plan. He wrote in the *Palladium-Item* in July 1996:

Providing a major stimulus for the Starr-Gennett development is Laurel Martin of Glendale, Calif. She and other members of the Gennett family are involved and have been impressed by the dedication and expertise of Wayne Vincent (restoration of the Gennett home at 1829 E. Main), Sam Meier (Starr-Gennett historian, jazz expert, and our link to many individuals world-wide interested in the plan), Al Gentry and the Starr-Gennett Preservation Fund board (who have supported local jazz performances, with the help of Earlham and IU East), and Charles Martin and the Gorge Park Committee. They, working with the city and county government will lead the formation of the public-private partnerships needed to design and fund this development...

Ambitious? Yes. Achievable? Yes. When? Wouldn't it be nice to enter the next century with this space that has divided the city, combined with a revitalized downtown to start the new century with a new heart for Richmond and Wayne County.

We anticipate release of the remaining \$1.1 million of our 1991 Gorge Park Build Indiana Grant in 1996-97 to get the ball rolling in the Starr-Gennett area. Your involvement and support are truly welcome.¹³⁶

Laurel Martin threw herself into leading the Starr Gennett Preservation Fund's effort to preserve Starr Valley's remaining structures and to build a museum on the site. She flew in monthly from California, met with various community leaders and constituencies, held board meetings, spoke with the citizens of Richmond, and engaged in other methods of advocacy for the Gorge project. Richmond Parks Superintendent Stan Lambert indicated in early 1997 that the city desired involvement in the planning stages for Starr Valley, thus released \$41,000 of the Build Indiana Funds to create a cohesive

¹³⁶ Garret Boone, "Whitewater Gorge Park, Cardinal Greenway, and Starr-Gennett Area Work Is Progressing," *Palladium-Item*, July 2, 1996, p. 6, newspapers.com, accessed April 2, 2021.

proposal. After that, Lambert and the Parks Department stated that the Starr-Gennett Preservation Fund's responsibility lie in raising the funds to build the park and museum. This division of responsibilities suited Martin and her board, as she struggled for the first few months of her tenure to establish the Foundation's place in the future of the Gorge.

While the Parks and Recreation Department owned the buildings and land in the Gorge and controlled the Build Indiana funds, Martin asserted this control occurred primarily due to the efforts of individuals and private enterprise. In a letter dated June 23, 1996, Martin addressed this belief to Lambert. She stated, "Build Indiana monies were raised by the early work of Bill Delk and Al Gentry getting the gorge plans into the State budget through Senator Alan Paul, with Garret (Boone) continuing on to raise funds through NEH and the state...Even the gorge's ownership is due to a gift to the city from the private sector."¹³⁷ In other words, under Martin's leadership, action and forward progress towards a renovated and preserved Starr Valley was her's and the Starr-Gennett Foundation board's mission and therefor it must be empowered to lead the way. She further noted to Lambert that, "Government moves very slowly. That slowness debilitates energy from those who would move quickly...Talk is protracted, and what is more draining than that exercise?"¹³⁸ The Starr Gennett Preservation Foundation's board consisted of local preservationists, business and education leaders, and historians whose expertise lie in Starr Piano, Gennett Records, and jazz history. Its membership included Al Gentry, Bill Delk, Sandy Lingle, Sam Meier, Duncan Schiedt, and Susan and Peter

¹³⁷ Laurel Martin letter to Stan Lambert, June 23, 1996, Laurel Martin's personal collection.

¹³⁸ Ibid, Martin letter to Lambert.

Smith of Earlham College. As part of Martin's effort to include community leaders in the Fund's effort, she invited Dr. David Fulton, Chancellor of Indiana University East, onto the board. Upon reflection of her time leading the board, Martin cited her invitations to Dr. Fulton and Linda Gennett Irmischer as the two most poignant results of her time in Richmond. Both Fulton and Irmischer proved dedicated individuals who strongly advocated for the Starr-Gennett legacy in the new millennium.

In an effort to both build interest from the general population of Richmond, which also included a bit of public education and urban beautification, Laurel Martin organized and funded several murals depicting Gennett's music history on downtown buildings. For the first, Martin commissioned muralist Pam Bliss and Diane Toshlog to recreate a photo of Bix and his Rhythm Jugglers taken inside the Gennett studio in 1925. The photo included not only influential cornetist, Bix Beiderbecke, but Tommy Dorsey, who went on to have a very successful career leading one of the most popular big bands. Bliss and Toshlog painted the mural on a building at the corner of South Ninth and A Streets, which is located in the middle of Richmond's downtown district on US Highway 40, the National Road.¹³⁹ They unveiled the mural entitled "The Cradle of Recorded Jazz" in August 1997. Soon after several other murals, many commissioned by and paid for primarily by Laurel Martin, appeared throughout the city, including murals honoring Hoagy Carmichael, Louis Armstrong, Charley Patton, Lonnie Johnson, and one entitled "Gennett Firsts," which featured images of Fred Gennett, Gene Autry, Louis Armstrong,

¹³⁹ The city later moved the mural to the Depot District on North 8th Street between D and E Streets.

Jelly Roll Morton, Lawrence Welk, and Lil Hardin Armstrong. While the mural implied that these artists created their first recordings in Richmond, Autry and Morton had recorded elsewhere prior to Gennett. Nonetheless, the citizens of Richmond suddenly had a visual reminder about the city's place in musical and cultural history. Additionally, Martin pledged to pay half of the \$60,000 salary for a jazz museum director for their first two years.

The hope that the murals might spur further engagement and support of the efforts in the Gorge proved overly optimistic. But in defense of the murals, each provided fast and forward motion that did not rely on committees, consensus, or much organization, as the rehabilitation of a historic site and building of a museum. It did illustrate the operative force and methodology of Martin. To her, it was better to do something, do it public, while behind the scenes machinations played out. The appearance of forward progress, something incrementally viable and tangible to the public, served the effort in positive ways. To many the Gorge project had become little more than frequent updates about meetings, grant applications, and never-ending planning and plans while the remaining buildings deteriorated and vagrants dumped trash throughout the Gorge property.

Garret Boone believed Laurel Martin's leadership was the catalyst needed for the creation of the jazz museum. However, such was not the case. While Martin assembled a board, co-authored a mission statement, and met with various constituents, politicians, and potential donors, she found the city's desire for consensus building detrimental. She

returned to Richmond in April 1999 to find the city had expanded the board to over twenty people, who had produced a newly drafted mission statement with museum themes quite different from those she had developed with Michael Sands in a document entitled “Starr-Gennett Museum Suggestions.” The difficult balance of private leadership for a project on public land proved too difficult and frustrating for Martin to manage. She resigned on May 13, 1999, from the Starr-Gennett Foundation and all city committees. Additionally, she noted in her resignation letter the city’s refusal to release any of the Build Indiana funds toward the \$200,000 budgeted for the museum’s start up costs and the hiring of a director.

In her letter of resignation to the Foundation, Martin recounted the final straw and the ultimate difficulty in such a partnership, which she argued was more process than progress.

At the general meeting of the foundation in March, our chairwoman [Karen Mahoney of the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department] facilitated a group process to solicit *all* opinions as to the intent and content of a Gennett/jazz museum. Only three on our twenty-man committee are learned in the Gennett jazz history, and one of these is not the chairwoman. A lengthy group processing session ensued. The resulting group consensus was not made on the basis of a well-reasoned proposal which the group had reflected upon beforehand, just the result of a seat-of-the-pants group process. And this consensus was not voted upon - though it is the supposed to be the foundation of what this project is all about. Strange that we didn’t vote? Not at all. Voting does not facilitate consensus, as the voting up or down of a matter allows that differences exist. Voting is the enemy of group consensus, talking its boon companion.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Laurel Martin’s Letter of Resignation to the Starr Gennett Foundation Committee, May 13, 1999, author’s collection.

Eventually the city released the Build Indiana funds, but its allocation aimed more at remediation rather than forward progress on a museum. It did release \$50,000 for the museum project in August 1999, but required that the Starr-Gennett Foundation raise the majority of those funds on its own. Upon her resignation, Martin withdrew her offer to pay half of the \$60,000 salary of the Director of the museum and returned to California. She re-budgeted this funds toward the commissioning of new murals in Richmond. In her resignation letter's concluding paragraph, she summed up her frustration.

Finally, see the six months it has taken to group process a mission statement. Envision how long it will take to facilitate consensus on a building, exhibits, interiors, exteriors, amphitheater, access roads. How will you keep from processing the individual creativity out of the executive director? It is an aberration to think that inspiration is a creation of a committee. Dear souls, I may stand alone, but I think I can stand quite comfortably alongside Margaret Thatcher, who has been called "an iron lady of conviction in a sea of consensus."¹⁴¹

Mike Gennett, Fred Gennett's grandson, observed in an email that Martin's frustration and resignation were the result of the process but also personality conflict with her and some of the city's officials on the larger twenty-person committee. "I know what she means when she talks about the people in charge being concerned about process and not content...So if the steering committee of 20 is not driven by these visionaries, then the chances of the project coming together and being worth something are reduced."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Laurel Martin's Letter of Resignation to the Starr Gennett Foundation Committee, May 13, 1999, author's collection.

¹⁴² Email from Mike Gennett to Tim Gennett, May 23, 1999, author's collection.

The year 1999 had witnessed several steps forward: an exhibition opening at the Wayne County Historical Museum; a Grammy Foundation grant for over eighteen-thousand dollars to digitize Gennett 78s for release on compact disc; \$110,000 raised largely from Foundation members; and the production of a thirty-minute Gennett documentary. Martin's departure stopped additional forward progress. The next several years witnessed a lot of back and forth towards a museum project and a recalibration of priority projects for the Starr-Gennett Foundation. For all intents and purposes, the building of a museum dedicated solely to the music and company history in the Gorge died the day Laurel Martin resigned from the board. Martin further detailed her reasoning a few years later in a letter dated August 2, 2013, to Linda Gennett Irmischer. Martin recalled this period.

When I met with him [Mayor Dennis Andrews] asking that he do so [release the Build Indiana funds to the Starr Gennett Foundation to use on progressing the development of the museum and Gorge], stressing that the Gennett history in the recording industry could be a money-making tourist attraction, he replied that there were many Richmond industries that were a part of the city's heritage. I reminded him that none of the former large industries had carried forward in the present day, only our jazz history.¹⁴³

While Martin withdrew from any effort in the Gorge, she continued to support the efforts of the Starr-Gennett Foundation. She funded several of the medallions installed in the Gorge beginning in 2007 and always offered help and insight to scholars studying Starr Piano and Gennett history, including my book and the 2020 Indiana Historical Society's special exhibit, "You Are There, 1927: Gennett Studios."

¹⁴³ Laurel Martin letter to Linda Gennett Irmischer, August 2, 2013, author's collection.

In 1999 Rick Kennedy perhaps best put his finger on the problem with a jazz museum in the Gorge when he spoke at the Richmond Rotary Club. Kennedy noted jazz and jazz history possessed little interest to modern society and that a museum dedicated solely to that aspect of Gennett's history was a losing proposition. "Only three percent of the country listens to jazz, and of those listeners, only one out of fifteen to old jazz. I would hate to see the beautiful history of jazz in Richmond become an albatross around the city's neck."¹⁴⁴ Kennedy offered a solution of working with other areas museums, such as a partnership between the Starr-Gennett Foundation and the Wayne County Historical Museum. Jim Waechter, Wayne County Historical Museum's Director, noted the museum's need to expand to accommodate such a partnership but also an expansion of the focus, as "Gennett is so much more than just jazz." However, the city and foundation's initial response to this possible solution remained to build in the Gorge. Karen Montgomery, now Starr-Gennett Foundation's president replied, "The original site is a Mecca for jazz enthusiasts. The Wayne County Historical Museum is not a Mecca."¹⁴⁵

With that, the tone and temper emanating from the city moved towards the more realistic creation of a joint museum project, which took hold within three years of Kennedy's 1999 speech. The *Palladium-Item* published an op-ed in favor of collaboration and highlighted Andy Klein's letter to the editor as "The Letter of the

¹⁴⁴ Kent Mitchell, "Author: Jazz Museum Must Be Connected to Existing One," *Palladium-Item*, September 15, 1999, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 16, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Kent Mitchell, "Author: Jazz Museum Must Be Connected to Existing One," *Palladium-Item*, September 15, 1999, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 16, 2021.

Week” soon after. Klein, of Columbus, Ohio, encouraged the collaboration but not before he took a very harsh and somewhat misguided shot at the Starr-Gennett Foundation.

While largely inaccurate, many in Richmond shared in his misperception.

To claim the original site as a Mecca for jazz enthusiasts may be correct on its face, but coming from a group which has stood idly by these 20 years as the site was systematically looted makes the statement ludicrous. While the Wayne County Historical Museum has quietly collected an outstanding collection of artifacts pertaining to the Starr-Gennett legacy, the foundation has dithered and dawdled and spent tens of thousands of other people’s dollars on nothing of substance.¹⁴⁶

Regardless, the Foundation and the city continued its jazz museum pursuit in the Gorge and the Foundation began to expand its mission and outreach. David Fulton, Chancellor of Indiana University East, whom Laurel Martin invited to join the Starr-Gennett Foundation board, took over as President in 2000.

Fulton focused on manageable and realistic goals for the Starr-Gennett Foundation and enumerated the priorities for the immediate future with a priority on expanding the outreach beyond Richmond. The foundation’s primary goal lie in establishing a visual presence in the Gorge that signaled forward progress. This presence included the installation of interpretive markers at the remaining buildings and the studio site and the preservation of the painted Gennett logo on the Logo Building. He told the readers of the *Palladium-Item* that, “We need to get something accomplished. We need to

¹⁴⁶ Andy Klein, “Letter of the Week: Starr-Gennett Foundation Should Work with Museum,” *Palladium-Item*, September 22, 1999, p. 7, newspapers.com, accessed April 16, 2021.

have something in the gorge that people can visit.”¹⁴⁷ This effort required public access and collaboration with the Parks and Recreation Department, which oversaw the development of the Cardinal Greenway, that included the Starr Valley site. Thoughts of a museum in the Gorge did not disappear. Work towards that goal continued with discussions of developing a new plan and hiring a director, but the Foundation sought ways to have immediate presence and impact, much in the spirit of Laurel Martin’s mural initiative.

Strut Miss Lizzie: Starr-Gennett in the New Millennium

Won't you strut Miss Lizzie, Get busy!
 We wanna see you walk;
 Oh, the folks all see the way you syncopate,
 Hear the whole town talk!
 Miss Lee and Her Jazz Band, “Strut Miss Lizzie,” 1921.¹⁴⁸

In 2001, the Starr-Gennett Foundation hired its first employees, including Tom Graves as its project coordinator. Graves, a Richmond native and recent graduate of Oberlin Conservatory, had four primary goals:

1. Create an attractive and welcoming environment in the Whitewater Gorge.
2. Raise \$200,000 to plan the jazz museum.
3. Create a safe and convenient storage facility for jazz artifacts.

¹⁴⁷ Jody Peacock, “Starr-Gennett Board Solidifies Jazz Goals,” *Palladium-Item*, April 17, 2000, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 16, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Miss Lee and Her Jazz Band, “Strut Miss Lizzie,” by Kramer and Layton, recorded on September 15, 1921, Gennett unissued.

4. Tell the story of Starr Piano Co. and Gennett Records.¹⁴⁹

Graves first created a Starr-Gennett website to serve as an accessible point of information about the foundation's efforts and the history of the two companies.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, the website created a place to sell the Foundation's merchandise, which included several recent releases of Gennett material on compact disc. It also encouraged visitors to join the Foundation. The Foundation hired Elizabeth Surles as its archivist later that year. The Foundation charged Surles, a recent graduate of Lawrence University, with the building and maintaining of a collection of artifacts and primary source material.¹⁵¹

As the two new employees began their respective tasks, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Department finally determined the fate of the deteriorating Concrete Building on the southern half of the Gorge. It decided to pay Mike Delucio & Sons \$124,500 to raze the building and remove the debris. The building proved beyond repair or repurposing and only hindered further efforts to establish the greenway through the Gorge property. Stan Lambert observed, "Part of the roof had caved in, and the building has been gutted by a former owner in the late 1970s. If we had wanted to use it, we would have to start from scratch in installing sewer and water, electrical and ducts for heating and air conditioning. It just didn't make sense."¹⁵² In its heyday, the Concrete

¹⁴⁹ Peacock, "Starr-Gennett Board Solidifies Jazz Goals," p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Bill Engle, "Local Son Returns Home to Direct Jazz Foundation," *Palladium-Item*, December 26, 2000, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 15, 2021.

¹⁵¹ The Foundation had a keen eye for talent, as Elizabeth Surles is now the head archivist at the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers - Newark, one the largest and most notable jazz repositories.

¹⁵² Bill Engle, "Gennett Records Building Razed," *Palladium-Item*, May 30, 2001, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed April 15, 2021.

Building, the last structure added to the property by Starr Piano, served as a location for the recording and pressing of records. In several of the 1990s redevelopment plans, the building served as the potential home for an amphitheater or a museum focused on jazz history or manufacturing and invention. But by May 2001, it served only as a blight, a hazard and liability, and a building structure too far gone for the City of Richmond and its citizens to justify spending any money to save it.

With the Concrete Building now gone and public sentiment turning away from a jazz museum in the Gorge, several of the local historical and arts institutions began meeting to discuss a collective and collaborative future, much as Rick Kennedy suggested a few months prior. Members of the Wayne County Historical Museum, the Richmond Art Museum, and the Starr-Gennett Foundation began meeting in July of 2001 to discuss shared goals and needs. Soon, the Indiana National Road Association joined the discussions. All four acknowledged the limitations of competing for the same local dollars in fundraising and grant efforts. The major obstacle for the group laid in the space limitations of both the Historical Museum and Art Museum and the ultimate desire for the Starr-Gennett Foundation to locate in the Gorge. But the coalition of organizations decided to apply for grant money to conduct a feasibility study focused on a single site for all four organizations. The Wayne County Foundation awarded this effort a \$61,000 impact grant to study the combined museum proposal. Indications throughout the community appeared to support this collaboration, as it did not force the building of or capability of supporting four museums in four new locations.

Meanwhile, the Starr-Gennett Foundation elevated Elizabeth Surles to its project coordinator and began a national effort to raise awareness about its efforts and to fundraise for a jazz museum. In its inaugural newsletter, David Fulton recounted in his “President’s Message,” many of the Starr-Gennett Foundation’s successes over the previous year, including raising \$200,000 locally in pledges towards a museum, the hiring of two employees, and the release of three CDs of Gennett’s “Greatest Hits.” Fulton further elaborated the Foundation’s plans and goals for its membership.

Our priorities for the coming year include an overall clean-up of the original Starr-Gennett site, located in Richmond’s Whitewater Gorge. Work has already begun and we plan to add interpretive signage for visitors to learn from and enjoy. The other site-specific project on our upcoming agenda is a reconstruction of the original Gennett Recording Studio, where so many of America’s finest musicians were first recorded.

Along with our plans to highlight the original Starr-Gennett site, we also intend to continue our collaboration with other organizations in the area to ensure the long-term success of our ultimate goal: The establishment of a museum in Richmond, devoted to the proper preservation and interpretation of the history surrounding the Gennett Record Company and its parent Starr Piano Company.¹⁵³

The newsletter featured articles on the company’s history and promised to continue on a semi-annual basis. The second edition appeared in people’s mailboxes in the summer of 2002.

Ultimately the four organizations tabled the idea of building a ‘super museum,’ even though the feasibility study indicated it as the best course of action. Both the Wayne County Historical Museum and Richmond Arts Museum refused to sign a letter of intent

¹⁵³ David Fulton, “President’s Message,” *Starr Gennett Foundation Inaugural Newsletter*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Winter 2001 - 2002, author’s collection.

drawn up by M. Goodwin Associates that set a timetable for the collaboration to create by-laws, strategic plans, budgeting, and fundraising plans. The leaders of the various organizations indicated an interest to reconvene at a later date, but that never occurred.

Elizabeth Surles recalls the frustration with the process.

They proposed a project that was completely unfeasible based on Richmond's budget and economics. To me, the consultants just took the money and ran and it was a complete waste of time and looking back it makes me kind of furious. What we really needed was somebody who could have better negotiated between the partners. All of you have important stories to tell and find the balance.¹⁵⁴

While all offered pleasantries and platitudes in the press as to why this collaboration did not appear feasible, there was also much personality conflict and divergent visions for each organization's future. Ultimately the two museums maintained its current locations and focused on its own mission. "And what a waste!" states Elizabeth Surles, "There was a lot of synergy and the leaders in Richmond were pushing for it."¹⁵⁵ The Starr-Gennett Foundation returned its focus back to the Gorge. Various grants and budget allocations caused some progress. For instance, the First Street extension into the Gorge from Main Street was the result of a Brownfield Abatement grant, due to the presence of oil in the soil just south of the Logo Building.

In the Foundation's Spring 2003 newsletter, it outlined a plan to build a replica of the recording studio on the original site. The front page included an artist rendering of the exterior and interior of the proposed building structure. The Foundation highlighted

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Surles interview with author, May 21, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Surles interview with author.

the progress made by the Parks and Recreation Department to remediate and rehabilitate the grounds in the Gorge and the time finally arrived for the Foundation to both create its presence and interpret the site. Any discussion of a collaboration between itself and Richmond's other historical and cultural institutions was absent despite all three organization running deficits in 2003.¹⁵⁶ The footprint of the proposed building was considerably smaller and humbler than previous proposed museums, thus presented a more realistic endeavor from past concepts that required the rehabilitation of the six story Concrete Building, which contained tens of thousands of square feet.

In 2004, however, the Foundation recalibrated its proposal to add to the built environment in the Gorge. Instead of a complete recreation of the studio with offices, it presented a proposal for a 'ghost' building in the Spring 2004 newsletter. The building proposed was an open air structure that outlined the footprint and original shape of the storage building turned recording studio. "The Board has been exploring the possibility of constructing a 'ghost' building on the former site of the recording studio, a project that one Board member fondly refers to as 'the spirit of the studio.'"¹⁵⁷ The idea for the ghost structure came from a trip Elizabeth Surles took to the Blue Heron ghost mining town in Big South Fork National Recreation Area in Kentucky. "There is an old coal mining village that has been reconstructed with just steel beams and interpretive panels to give

¹⁵⁶ According to data published in the *Palladium-Item* on July 25, 2004, The Richmond Art Museum had a \$46,000 deficit in 2002-2003, the Wayne County Historical Museum had a \$66,655 deficit in 2003, and the Starr-Gennett Foundation had a \$4,822 deficit in 2003.

¹⁵⁷ "The Spirit of the Studio," *Starr-Gennett Foundation Newsletter*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2004, p. 2, author's collection.

you a sense of the space. So there is interpretation but it is not a building that needs to be maintained.”¹⁵⁸ However on the following page, Surles, as the Foundation’s full-time employee and Project Coordinator, wrote the following regarding the collection of Gennett recordings.

The Foundation’s purpose in collecting Gennett and subsidiary label recordings has always been two-fold: creating a museum and building an archive. The current purposes are specifically to create a complete archive of Gennett and subsidiary label recordings and to establish a collection of artifacts beyond sound recordings to be used in interpretive and educational displays.¹⁵⁹

While the Foundation won a few grants, most notably from the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, to aid in the collection and digitization of a collection of Gennett-related recordings, Surles also notes in her article the difficulties the Foundation faced in its ability to meet and finance these endeavors.

In late 2003, the Foundation installed the first two interpretative markers at the site, which by then still was not one-hundred percent finished, though the greenway through the Gorge had opened to the public. Wayne and Ruby Gibson of Kershner Signs in Burlington, Vermont fabricated the first two signs. Ruby Gibson is the granddaughter of Clarence Gennett, Starr Piano’s treasurer. Later in 2004, the Department of Commerce’s Slum and Blight Elimination program awarded the City of Richmond a \$554,000 grant to clear out the contaminated soil and replace it with clean soil, further stabilize the Logo Building, and install lights in the Gorge. Additionally, the Richmond

¹⁵⁸ Surles interview with author

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Surles, “Behind the Scenes,” *Starr-Gennett Foundation Newsletter*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2004, p. 3, author’s collection.

Redevelopment Commission approved \$300,000 for improvements in the Starr-Gennett section of the Whitewater Gorge, largely to make up for shortfall from the Department of Commerce's grant due to rising steel prices.¹⁶⁰

Shortly thereafter, Lt. Governor Kathy Davis awarded the Starr-Gennett Foundation \$71,250 through the Quality of Place Initiative (QPI) with a required twenty-five percent match from an anonymous donor. The purpose of the grant lie in supporting research into the viability of creating a Starr Piano and Gennett Records themed tourist attraction in Richmond.

The working title for the project is the 'Gateway to Indiana's Musical Heritage,' which will encompass development of the Starr Piano factory site as well as a Starr-Gennett interpretive center. As currently conceived, the project's three major components are the Gennett Recording Studio Reconstruction, a Starr-Gennett Interpretive Center, and a music Walk of Fame.¹⁶¹

This document was the first mention of the development of some sort of interpretation within the Cardinal Greenway structure, a walk of fame embedded in the walking path. The QPI, however, did not specify the attraction had to be within the original borders of the industrial complex, while the Foundation's study focused solely on activities there.

With the nearly \$900,000 in funds, the Richmond Parks and Recreation Department began its effort to stabilize the Logo Building and adaptively reuse it through a conversion to an open-air shelter in June 2005. It planned to construct a steel structure

¹⁶⁰ Bill Engle, "Spinning Project Is in Limbo," *Palladium-Item*, November 17, 2004, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 30, 2021.

¹⁶¹ "Indiana Lt. Governor Awards Foundation \$71,250," *Starr Gennett Foundation Newsletter*, Winter 2004-2005, Volume 3, Issue 2, p. 1, author's collection.

within the original walls of the Logo Building that both stabilized the original structure and provided the ability to one day place a roof and other amenities within the building. The Parks and Recreation Department planned on renting out the facility just like it did other pavilions within its parks system. Al Gentry, the Starr-Gennett Foundation President, noted, “The new shelter inside the old shell will be big enough to hold a variety of public and private events.”¹⁶² Elizabeth Surles recounted to the *Palladium-Item* that Starr Piano built the Logo Building in the 1910s and used it to manufacture phonographs and phonograph records, though historic records also indicated its use in piano construction and storage of building materials used in the above processes. Surles stated, “I would say that saving the building and stabilizing it is a great effort on the city’s part. I think it’s an important part of the larger plan to make that site usable again.”¹⁶³ The first order of business lie in the removal of the near jungle of weeds and vegetation that flourished there for over two decades since the roof collapsed in the 1993 fire.

Following the clearing of vegetation, workers poured a concrete floor and erected a steel building with a slanted steel roof. They removed and rehabilitated the bricks above the second story, while leaving the six-story stairwell and elevator shaft in tact. The workers used those bricks as replacements for any defects in the two-story building structure. Though the structure now possessed a roof, its open-air designation was due to

¹⁶² “Preservation Enters Next Phase: \$896,000 Stabilization Will Allow Building to Open for Public Use,” *Starr-Gennett Newsletter*, Spring-Summer 2005, Volume IV, Issue 1, p. 1, author’s collection.

¹⁶³ Bill Engle, “Starr-Gennett Building: Preservation Enters Next Phase,” *Palladium-Item*, June 8, 2005, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed April 30, 2021.

the many windows within the two-story structure being open without glass or any material to control the elements or temperature. Interestingly, an article in the *Palladium-Item* in August 2005 revealed that, “At one point, the city had plans to use the building as an open-air ice-skating rink.”¹⁶⁴ Thankfully, that idea, incredibly limited in its scope and purpose, received the kibosh and instead the city focused on converting the abandoned building into a public space for concerts, weddings, farmer’s markets, and other gatherings.

While the city stabilized and repurposed the Logo Building, the Starr-Gennett Foundation’s feasibility study funded through the Quality of Place Initiative (QPI) grant, revealed that Starr-Gennett attraction, whether a museum, interpretative center, or a ‘ghost studio’ alone could not spur enough tourism to justify its expense.¹⁶⁵ However, Amy Webb, a member of the feasibility study committee and of the National Trust for Historic Preservation observed, “You need a balance of activities. The Starr-Gennett attraction could be an important part of the draw, but a complete tourism package would require a county-wide effort.”¹⁶⁶ That balance, the study found, included dining, other tourist attractions, special events, and shopping within a manageable distance and/or within the Gorge complex, as well as throughout Wayne County. The study estimated the

¹⁶⁴ Brian Zimmerman, “In the Gorge: Steel Beams Will Be Put in Soon to Stabilize Site,” *Palladium-Item*, August 23, 2005, p. 1, newspapers.com, April 30, 2021.

¹⁶⁵ “Feasibility Study, Starr-Gennett Attraction. Final Report, November 2005,” Indiana Office of Tourism Development through the Lt. Governor’s Quality of Place Initiative (QPI), November 2005, author’s collection.

¹⁶⁶ Bill Engle, “Study Says Starr-Gennett Attraction Alone Won’t Spur Tourism,” *Palladium-Item*, November 9, 2005, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 30, 2021.

cost of building a museum or interpretative center just under four-million dollars with an annual operating budget of \$320,000.¹⁶⁷

That expense proved too much for the City of Richmond to bear, the feasibility study concluded. It probably did not help that of the 2,500 questionnaires mailed out by the study, only 162 recipients returned it and noted little to no knowledge of Richmond's place in jazz or music history.¹⁶⁸ "We did all this market research and we did focus groups...When we asked people what do you think about Richmond and if they would go to this (a Starr-Gennett Museum), they didn't know anything about it or Richmond. All they knew about Richmond was Tom Raper's RVs."¹⁶⁹ While attendees expressed interest in further discussions of how to continue the pursuit of the proposal, for all intents and purposes, barring a "Hail Mary" miracle, a museum in the Gorge was now a dead letter. Furthering the museum's death-knell, an editorial in the *Palladium-Item*, again overly focused solely on the jazz history component, observed the following.

The idea that Richmond can and should do more to promote its jazz roots and history is a good one. But good ideas have fallen flat before for lack of sound execution. Even so promising an attraction as the rock-and-roll museum in Cleveland, Ohio has fallen on harder times more recently and is constantly in need of a new attractions or draws. It will serve neither Richmond nor jazz very well to have a local museum fall into disuse and financial debt.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ "Feasibility Study, Starr-Gennett Attraction. Final Report, November 2005," Indiana Office of Tourism Development through the Lt. Governor's Quality of Place Initiative (QPI), November 2005, author's collection.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, Bill Engle, "Study Says Starr-Gennett Attraction Alone Won't Spur Tourism."

¹⁶⁹ Surles interview with author.

¹⁷⁰ "Starr-Gennett: History Attraction, A Deserving Idea Must Be Workable," *Palladium-Item*, November 16, 2005, p. 6, newspapers.com, accessed April 30, 2021.

Soon after the symbolic death of the Gorge-based museum or interpretive center, the city concluded its work on the Logo Building and the Starr-Gennett Foundation recalibrated its focus on how to establish its presence in the Gorge and attract visitors without a new structure.

In its Winter 2005-2006 newsletter, Elizabeth Surles revealed the recalibrated focus of the Starr-Gennett Foundation in its front page article entitled “Plans Finalized for Starr-Gennett Future.” In it, Surles outlined the Foundation’s eight-point first phase plan now devoid of any Gorge-based museum or center. Instead, the Foundation remained committed to a presence in the Gorge and to the education and outreach regarding the Starr Piano and Gennett Records history in total. The second phase recommended the development of a presence in the center or northern part of the city for its “interpretative facility to house the Foundation administrative offices, storage for the Starr-Gennett collection, an archive for music scholars, and an interpretative center for visitors.”

1. A Walk of Fame featuring the most important Gennett recording artists to be located along the Whitewater Gorge Trail at the former site of the Starr Piano Company.
2. A Historic Audio Tour highlighting sites in Richmond with connections to the Starr Piano Company and Gennett Records.
3. An annual music festival to celebrate the Starr-Gennett legacy.
4. A tour guide training program to prepare volunteer guides to lead group tours.
5. A “Satellite Museum” with small, temporary exhibits emphasizing different aspects of the Starr-Gennett legacy to be installed at select Richmond locations.
6. Interpretive signage at key locations in Richmond with relevance to the Starr-Gennett legacy.

7. Collaboration amongst area attractions, government entities, and other organizations to increase Richmond and Wayne County's profile as a tourism destination.
8. Greater visibility for Starr-Gennett merchandise.¹⁷¹

It must be noted that while the plan mentions a museum-like installation, it does not mention a combined effort or any collaboration specifically with the Wayne County Historical Museum, Richmond Art Museum, and Richmond Symphony. That idea presented only a year or two earlier with much fanfare and enthusiasm now lie dead. The Starr-Gennett Foundation identified other establishments throughout the city for its interpretive presentations, most notably the Richmond Furniture Gallery in the Depot District. The Richert Family rehabilitated the large circa 1880s structure that once served as the Miller Brothers Hardware shop to create one of the largest furniture retailers in the Midwest. Which featured an "80-foot long and 22-foot tall hand-painted 'JAZZ MURAL' in the aptly named 'Jazz Room.'"¹⁷²

In the summer of 2006, the Richmond Parks and Recreation Department began offering the use of and public programming in the newly opened Logo Building. It advertised the space for a \$250 a day rental fee with the requirement of a Certificate of Liability. The inaugural event opened to the public was the first of a summer series movie showing of Disney's *Eight Below* with an offering of concessions and games

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Surles, "Plans Finalized for Starr-Gennett Future," *Starr-Gennett Foundation Newsletter*, Volume IV, Issue II, Winter 2005-2006, p. 1, author's collection.

¹⁷² "About Us," Richmond Furniture Gallery website, <https://www.richmondfurnituregallery.com/about-us/company-history/>, accessed April 3, 2021.

through its Just Us Kids Outdoors (JUKO) program. Soon thereafter, the Starr-Gennett Foundation held its annual “Untouchable Times” fundraiser which featured a guided bus tour led by local historian and Morrison-Reeves librarian Sue King of the sites highlighted in the *Historic Tour of Starr-Gennett Sites* brochure. The three page booklet highlighted seven sites including the Gennett Mansion, the Logo Building and Gorge Park, the building that once housed the Starr Piano Showroom on the corner of Tenth and Main, in addition to the Starr Piano and Gennett Record exhibit in the Wayne Country Historical Society.¹⁷³ The Starr-Gennett Foundation also announced in October its Walk of Fame initiative.

The idea of a permanent walk of fame installation was an outgrowth of an idea Elizabeth Surles developed on a whim to help promote the organization at various functions and community events throughout Richmond.

I bought stick on floor tiles at Lowe’s and purchased a gold star that was the same size to adhere to it and stenciled the performers names in black marker, Louis Armstrong, Gene Autry, Jelly Roll Morton, and so on. I put contact paper over it and stuck those on the ground so that when people walked on the sidewalk they walked over them, stopped, and said ‘what is this?’ The whole thing kind of shocked people into paying attention to Gennett.¹⁷⁴

The Foundation announced that the program of installing markers in the walkway in the Gorge on the Cardinal Greenway path will commence with a weekend of celebratory events, concerts, and inductions into the Gennett Walk of Fame in September 2007. Thus

¹⁷³ *Historic Tour of Starr-Gennett Sites*, Starr Gennett Foundation, 2006, author’s collection.

¹⁷⁴ Surles interview with author.

a mere ten months after announcing its recalibrated first phase of initiatives, the Starr-Gennett Foundation already showed progress or success on all eight of them.

The Foundation appointed a Board of Advisors to recommend Gennett artists for the inaugural Walk of Fame induction class. The board consisted of David Baker, Al Cobine, Dr. David Evans, Jeff Hamilton, Dr. John E. Haase, Dan Morgenstern, Duncan Schiedt, and Dr. Charles Wolfe.¹⁷⁵ Dr. David Fulton served as the Foundation's leader of the committee until his death in 2016. The first ten inductees represented not only the breadth of styles and genres that Gennett recorded, but firmly illustrated the international renown of many of its former artists. The genres of jazz, blues, country, pop, and gospel were represented and included two Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and two Country Music Hall of Fame inductees.

The inaugural Walk of Fame class of ten included Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Jelly Roll Morton, Hoagy Carmichael, Gene Autry, Vernon Dalhart, Big Bill Broonzy, "Georgia" Tom Dorsey, Joe "King" Oliver, and Lawrence Welk.¹⁷⁶ The Gennett family decided to fund the medallion of an eleventh inductee, Sidney Bechet, a few week prior to the induction weekend celebrations. The Foundation contracted with Wilson Tile in Omaha, Nebraska to design and create the tile medallions and bronze plates that provided a brief description of the artist and the donors. The circular

¹⁷⁵ The Starr-Gennett Foundation invited me to join the National Advisory Board in 2010. As of this writing, I still serve on that committee, though it has been a few years since the Foundation convened it.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Surles, "Walk of Fame Inductees Selected," *Starr-Gennett Foundation Newsletter*, Volume 5, Issue 1, Summer 2006, p. 1, author's collection.

medallions design measured three-feet in diameter and resembled a 78 RPM disc with a bronze label in the middle of the Gennett label most associated with that artist. Half of the medallion design featured a tile image of the artist from the era he or she recorded for Gennett and the other half resembled a black shellac disc. At the unveiling of the first marker at a ceremony in October 2006, Al Gentry remarked, “Through the years, I think we’ve matured into the realization that the Gennett legacy is a part of our national history...It’s about what took place here and how it influenced American music.”¹⁷⁷ Gentry, who had been a major force in the Starr-Gennett efforts since the 1970s, noted the change in focus from the effort’s early days compared to its recent history.

This change reflected the Foundations push in its recent years to reach out to people, institutions, and funding outside of the Richmond and Indiana borders. In order to raise the \$100,000 needed to fund and install the first twenty medallions, the Foundation expanded its membership to include dues paying members from thirty-five states and three countries. At the same time, the city received a \$200,000 Brownfield Grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency to remove the soil contaminated by Starr Piano during its days of manufacturing. This clean-up grant also allotted monies to improve the appearance of the grounds that now housed a rehabilitated Logo Building, greenway path, and soon, the Gennett Walk of Fame. Jeff Plasterer of the Starr-Gennett Foundation noted, “The better the appearance and farther along the project

¹⁷⁷ Rachel E. Sheely, “Historical Markers Unveiled,” *Palladium-Item*, October 28, 2006, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed April 30, 2021.

gets, the greater the impact it will have on bringing people to Richmond. From the economic aspect, it's important to develop the area as a tourist destination.”¹⁷⁸

By 2007, matters were finally moving in a positive and exciting direction for the preservation and interpretation of the Starr Piano and Gennett Records history.

Additionally, Bob and Donna Geddes purchased the Gennett mansion and under their stewardship, they remodeled the first floor to resemble the Henry and Alice Gennett era and began holding and hosting public events including farm-to-table dinners and Starr-Gennett Foundation functions.¹⁷⁹

On September 8, 2007, the Starr-Gennett Foundation formerly inducted its first eleven artists into its Walk of Fame and installed the medallions and markers in the Cardinal Greenway sidewalk. A month earlier, the Richmond Parks and Recreation department commissioned Pam Bliss, who painted many of the Gennett-themed murals throughout Richmond, to restore the parrot logo on the southern side of the Logo Building. In the opening letter contained within the commemorative souvenir program, the Foundation stated the Walk's mission, purpose, and future.

Today, the Starr Gennett Foundation honors eleven of the most accomplished artists by installing them in the newly established Gennett Records Walk of Fame here in Gorge Park. The Walk of Fame will help interpret the Park's Starr Piano Company and Gennett Records Historic Site, which will become a Mecca for lovers of traditional music from Indiana, the nation, and the world at large . . .

¹⁷⁸ “Cleanup Should Allow Greenway Upgrades,” *Palladium-Item*, June 17, 2007, p. 3, newspapers.com, accessed May 7, 2021.

¹⁷⁹ In 2016, the Geddes sold the Gennett Mansion to Tina and Ralph Conti, who have also held some public functions on the first floor. Tina Conti serves also serves as the President of the Starr-Gennett Foundation.

This is just the start. Welcome to the opening celebration of the Gennett Records Walk of Fame!¹⁸⁰

The day featured several free concerts around the city and in the Logo Building, games, food vendors, and the unveiling of the Hoagy Carmichael statue which now resides at Indiana University at Bloomington. Upon seeing the detailed and life-like statue of his father, Randy Carmichael asked it to borrow twenty dollars. In addition to over one-hundred attendees, the guest list at the unveiling of the Walk of Fame included the families of Hoagy Carmichael and the Gennetts. Laurel Martin, who served as the Foundation's chair a few years earlier and funded many of the murals around the city, remarked, "None of you can be as touched as I am. My husband and I loved the place and would do anything to keep it going."¹⁸¹ This commitment included the underwriting by her and other Gennett family members of many of medallions that the Foundation installed that day and in subsequent years.

During the inaugural Walk of Fame weekend, the Starr-Gennett Foundation announced both its next series of inductees and a date for the 2008 celebration to also be held in September. The next ten inductees, again represented the diverse sounds recorded by Gennett and in the Richmond studio and included one inductee each from the Rock and Roll and Country Music Halls of Fame: Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Fletcher Henderson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Guy Lombardo, Uncle Dave Macon, Red Nichols,

¹⁸⁰ "Gennett Records Walk of Fame Opening Celebration," *Walk of Fame Commemorative Program*, September 2007, p. 1, author's collection.

¹⁸¹ Michelle Manchir, "Making a Record for Posterity," *Palladium-Item*, September 9, 2007, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed April 16, 2021.

Charley Patton, Homer Rodeheaver, and Fats Waller. In subsequent years through 2013, the Foundation inducted between one and five new members each year during its September Walk of Fame weekend celebration to varying levels of success, based largely on choice of programming. To date, the Starr-Gennett Foundation under advisement from its National Advisor Board, inducted the following artists into its Walk of Fame: Bailey's Lucky Seven, Scrapper Blackwell, William Jennings Bryan, Jimmy Durante, Wendall Hall, Alberta Hunter, Lonnie Johnson, Bradley Kincaid, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Fiddlin' Doc Roberts and Asa Martin, the Pace Jubilee Singers, Artie Shaw, Earnest and Hattie Stoneman, and Roosevelt Sykes.

Whether Douglas Harper, who owned Wizard Designs in a building at the corner of South First Street where you turn to enter the Starr-Gennett site had a crystal ball or not is unknown. But due to his experience in that location, he foresaw in 2006 the perennial problem that confronts the Walk of Fame and the Gorge Park, which for all intents and purposes exists in a secluded location away from the city's population and regular police patrol. While Harper favored the development of the site and the installation of the Walk of Fame markers, he feared attracting vandals who desired to damage or 'strike' the monuments, as given its secluded location proved a soft and easy target.¹⁸² Sonia Brock, the City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Parks Superintendent at the time of the initial installations insured that her office will handle any defacement of the medallions and offered a strong condemnation of those that dared to deface or

¹⁸² Bill Engle, "Tourist Destination? Many Have Had Visions," *Palladium-Item*, February 16, 2006, p. 2, newspapers.com, accessed April 19, 2021.

damage them. “Some people have no regard for history or something meaningful. Maybe because it’s lacking in their own lives.”¹⁸³ In the years after the last installation in 2012¹⁸⁴ many medallions have been damaged some due to vandalism, but also due to environmental factors from improper installation and its location only a few yards from the Whitewater River.

Regardless, the Foundation carried on its annual celebratory weekend honoring the history of Starr Piano and Gennett Records. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the 2019 celebration drew its largest local crowd largely due to the presentation of family events, free music, and fireworks. Whether the Foundation and city will commence once again with inducting more artists remains unknown. In its initial design, it allotted space for eighty medallions and to date has installed thirty of the thirty-five medallion into the Greenway sidewalk. However, the Parks and Recreation Department both reaffirmed its commitment to maintain the medallions, the site, and the Logo Building and in 2020, winterized the Logo Building so that it could hold events their year-round including a weekly winter farmers market. With that commitment and

¹⁸³ Bill Engle, “An Incredible Story,” *Palladium-Item*, June 24, 2007, p. 9, newspapers.com, accessed May 7, 2021.

¹⁸⁴ The last artist inducted into the Walk of Fame was Jimmy Durante in 2016. As of 2021, the Foundation has not inducted any new artists into the Walk of Fame, while many worthy candidates exist including Earl ‘Fatha’ Hines, Tommy Dorsey, Mary Lou Williams, Blind Blake, just to name a few. Additionally, the National Board of Advisors have not met since 2012 when it voted to induct William Jennings Bryan, Fiddlin’ Doc Roberts, and Asa Martin (Roberts and Martin are featured together in a single medallion). A de facto meeting of its remaining members recommended Jimmy Durante as one of its choices and the Foundation proceeded with his induction and medallion creation soon after. In discussions with the author, various Foundation members expressed a desire to resume the induction of new members into the Walk of Fame, but desire a resolution to the condition of the current ones, a plan for safe installation of the remaining and any future ones, in addition to potential issues in funding and underwriting.

forward progress, slow as it may seem sometime, has led to a movement to commence with the application process to place the Logo Building on the National Register of Historic Places in 2022.

- Chapter Four -

**I Am Resolved: The Birthplace of Country Music Museum in
Bristol, Tennessee / Virginia, 1971 - 2014**



Image 4: Tim White's "Birthplace of Country Music Mural," photo by author.



Image 5: The Birthplace of Country Music Museum, photo by author.

Friends may oppose me, foes may beset me,
Still will I enter in.

I am resolved, and who will go with me?

Come, friends, without delay

Ernest V. Stoneman and His Dixie Mountaineers, "I Am Resolved." 1927.¹⁸⁵

On Monday, August 16, 1971, thousands of residents from Bristol, Tennessee / Virginia and the surrounding area gathered on the divided city's main thoroughfare at 408 State Street. They were there to celebrate the dedication of a seven foot obelisk commemorating the 1927 Victor Talking Machine Company's recordings once made on the now empty lot. According to an inscription on the monument, a diverse group of patrons sponsored the monument including, "The People of Bristol, the Historical Committee of the Greater Bristol Area, [the] Chamber of Commerce, the Bristol Lodge No. 14, and [the] International Oddfellows."¹⁸⁶ Almost forty-four years prior to the day of this gathering, Ralph Peer arrived in Bristol to record Southern white and black musicians for the burgeoning race and hillbilly marketplace. In the razed Taylor-Christian Hat Company building, Peer discovered and recorded two of the most important artists in the history of country and American music, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Those in attendance along with many community and civic leaders hoped to not only commemorate this historic two-week recording session, but to use it to drive both community pride and tourism to this small Appalachian city. However, this desire in 1971 served as a midpoint between the historic event in 1927 and the eventual opening of

¹⁸⁵ Ernest V. Stoneman and His Dixie Mountaineers, "I Am Resolved," by Palmer Hartsough and J. H. Fillmore, recorded on July 25, 1927, Victor 20171, 78 rpm.

¹⁸⁶ Historical Marker on State Street, Bristol, Tennessee, accessed September 5, 2018.

a dedicated museum and annual music festival that fulfilled those desires. It took forty-four years to dedicate a monument and it took another forty-three years to open a permanent Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

Those in attendance at the dedication of the marble obelisk heard from Mother Maybelle Carter, one-third of the Carter Family, Johnny Cash, Ralph Peer II, son of Ralph Peer, and Anita Court Rodgers, daughter of Jimmie Rodgers, Congressman William C. Wampler, Virginia Shine, director of the Jimmie Rodgers Museum, and many others.¹⁸⁷ The night before the dedication ceremony, the various organizations held a banquet at Jack Trayer's Convention Center that featured performances by Mother Maybelle Carter, Johnny Cash and his wife and daughter of Mother Maybelle, June Carter Cash, and others.¹⁸⁸ At the dedication ceremony, in addition to hearing about the recording sessions and the music played by these artists, the speakers outlined their plans to both commemorate Bristol's place in American cultural history by holding an annual music and arts festival called "Country Music Day," and by creating a permanent museum, the Carter-Rodgers Country Music Museum, to commemorate the Bristol Sessions. Local civic leader Fred Geromanos remarked,

We are here to honor a famous family from Southwest Virginia [the Carters] which gained national and world wide fame and a musical genius from Mississippi [Jimmie Rodgers], but this will not be a one time thing. We intend to

¹⁸⁷ Richard Boyd, "Bristol 'Country Music Day' Monument is Unveiled by Carter-Rodgers Families," *Bristol Virginia-Tennessean*, August 16, 1971, p. 1, Birthplace of Country Music Archives.

¹⁸⁸ "Mac King Oral History," September 3, 1987, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

follow through with [the] creation of the museum and hopefully Country Music Day will become an annual event.¹⁸⁹

While the latter wish came true, the Carter-Rodgers Country Museum never came to fruition. Country Music Day soon became a multi-day festival and featured some of country and bluegrass music's top performers including Johnny Cash, the Carters, Jim and Jesse McReynolds, and Ralph Stanley. A year after the dedication ceremony, the Bristol Country Music Foundation, Inc., formed and listed Fred Geromanos, Richard Boyd, Aelia Copenhaver, Mac King, Albert S. Kelly, Jr., Carl Pennington, and Mrs. Frank DeFriece as its Board of Directors. The foundation wanted to receive "monies and gifts on a national scale to be used to erect a Country and Western Music Museum in Bristol commemorating the cutting in Bristol of the first Country Music¹⁹⁰ recording [on] August 2, 1927."¹⁹¹ Interestingly, officials moved the obelisk marking the spot of the Bristol Session recordings around the city over the next decade and a half to locations closer to the interstate and the Welcome Center.

Progress towards the museum was slow. In 1973, the BCMF entered into an agreement with the Parks and Recreation Department in Bristol, Tennessee to both officially relocate the music festival and build an Appalachian Music Museum on city

¹⁸⁹ Richard Boyd, "Bristol 'Country Music Day' Monument is Unveiled by Carter-Rodgers Families," p 1.

¹⁹⁰ The records created during the Bristol Sessions were not the first records that were recognized or marketed as 'hillbilly,' 'old time,' or 'mountain music,' as country music was called then. The first recording occurred in the early 1920s with the first hillbilly release in 1923.

¹⁹¹ "Country Music Days 1973 Souvenir Program," Birthplace of Country Music Museum archive, 1973.

property in Steele Creek Park.¹⁹² In 1979, the BCMF announced plans to open an Appalachian Music Museum in Steele Creek Park.

After a combined effort led by Chad Pennington of the BCMF, the Odd Fellows Lodge, and a series of editorials by Richard Boyd in the *Bristol Virginia-Tennessean*, the BCMF acquired, moved, and renovated two historic log cabins to house the museum.

One of the homes was located at Wallace, Virginia and was constructed in 1792 and owned by the Nester Family; The other home was constructed in 1823 and owned by the Farnsworth family. The Farnsworth home was used by the Confederacy during the Civil War as a hospital. Both of these homes were constructed using the best masonry and carpentry work.¹⁹³

The organization changed the name of the annual festival from Country Music Days to Appalachian Music Days.

The April 1979 Appalachian Music Days Festival featured a tribute to the Carter Family¹⁹⁴ and performances by the Stonemans, the Carter Sisters, Johnny Cash, and others. Patrons also visited the museum under construction. Howard Taylor of the *Bristol Herald Courier* noted the following.

Presently under construction, the museum is a log structure that is expected to be under roof by the time of the celebration. Completion is still several weeks away, however, and dedication ceremonies will be held later this year. The museum

¹⁹² “Grand Opening and Ribbon Cutting Ceremony of the Appalachian Music Museum,” May 3, 1980, pamphlet, page 2, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Both Sara Carter and Mother Maybelle Carter died within a year of the 1979 Appalachian Music Festival. AP Carter died in 1960.

will house various items significant to the mountain music heritage of the region as well as a special 'Hall of Fame' that will honor musicians from the region.¹⁹⁵

Three months later, the planned August 1979 opening hit a snag all too familiar with such endeavors, financial shortfall. Chad Pennington explained to local reporters and citizens that the Appalachian Music Museum needed \$20,000 to complete its construction. Pennington hoped his announcement could lead to the local citizens stepping in to fill the \$20,000 shortfall of what he called a "worthwhile community project." Pennington added, "This museum is something that all the people of the Bristol area can be proud of. We sincerely hope that people throughout the Mountain Empire will respond to this need and allow the work to continue through their help."¹⁹⁶ He enumerated some of the work that still needed to be completed including chinking between the logs of the structure, landscaping, and constructing a parking area and roads. Without the additional funding all work ceased, as an agreement between the BCMF and the city of Bristol forbade any loans or debt.¹⁹⁷

Within months of Pennington's call for the public's involvement to raise the \$20,000 shortfall and three months after the projected opening date of August 1, 1979, the BCMF held an official ground-breaking ceremony on the museum's site inside the park on November 16, 1979. As construction and site preparations continued during the

¹⁹⁵ Howard Taylor, "Special Events Highlight Appalachian Music Days," *Bristol Herald Courier*, April 22, 1979, page unknown, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archive.

¹⁹⁶ Howard Taylor, "Museum Progress Hits Funding Snag," *Bristol Herald Courier*, July 18, 1979, p. 14, Birthplace of Country Music Archive.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

winter, the BCMF held a ceremony to lay a cornerstone with a time capsule on April 9, 1980. The capsule contained a proclamation signed by many of the officials that stated “the Appalachian Music Museum is for the benefit of the people,” along with a picture of the museum, and a set of the museum’s site plans.¹⁹⁸ Less than a month later, the Appalachian Music Museum officially opened on May 3, 1980.

The BCMF held a ribbon cutting ceremony, which over a hundred people attended during the Appalachian Music Days Festival. Carl Pennington, president of the BCMF remarked that the museum’s opening was “a dream come true - a day that I have waited ten years to see and one that I will never forget.”¹⁹⁹ The featured speaker was Dr. Charles Wolfe, a professor from Middle Tennessee State University and a recognized expert of early vernacular music history. Wolfe was one of the first scholars to explore the historical importance and impact of both the music recorded by Ralph Peer in Bristol and the music of the Appalachian Mountain region.

Despite the initial enthusiasm and fanfare, the museum struggled to find its audience. In 1979, A.P. and Sara Carter’s daughter, Janette Carter, opened the Carter Family Fold forty miles from Bristol in Maces Springs, Virginia. The Fold began promoting concerts as early as 1977 as a way to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Bristol Sessions.²⁰⁰ By 1979, Janette and Joe Carter officially opened the Carter Fold to

¹⁹⁸ “Cornerstone Set at Area Museum,” *Sullivan County News*, April 10, 1980, p. 1, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

¹⁹⁹ Howard Taylor, “Ribbon Cutting Ends Decade-Long Project,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, April 4, 1980, page unknown, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

²⁰⁰ “Johnny Cash to Be at the Carter’s Store,” *Kingsport Times-News*, July 30, 1977, p. 21, newspapers.com, accessed May 27, 2021.

visitors and concert goers. In 2004, the family carefully moved AP's cabin from its secluded location, rehabilitated the structure using best practices for historical preservation, to the main public area. While it has evolved over the years, its original mission remains present.

The Carter Fold is a living musical history museum and performance venue that features local and national Old-time, Bluegrass, and Country music performers and groups. Every Saturday night the hills around the Hiltons area of Scott County come alive with the sweet, yet simple harmonies that the original Carter Family originated almost a century ago.²⁰¹

After Janette Carter passed away in 2006, her daughter, Rita Forrester, stepped into the role of director and host of the weekly Saturday night gatherings. To date the National Register of Historic Places has listed four structures in and near the Carter Fold. This includes A.P Carter's Homeplace (July 1976), the A.P Carter Store (June 1985), A.P. and Sara Carter House (June 1985), and Maybelle and Ezra Carter House (June 1985). The Carter Family was ahead of the preservation curve, as the A.P. Carter Homeplace is amongst the early American popular music properties to be listed on the National Register.

Two years after the Carter Fold and the Appalachian Music Museum opened, Jack Tottle founded the Bluegrass, Old-time, and Country Music Program at East Tennessee State University in nearby Johnson City, Tennessee. Tottle is a respected mandolin player, recording artist, and the author of *Bluegrass Mandolin*, released in 1975. Charles Wolfe and Ted Olson recognize the profound impact and sense of pride this situation of

²⁰¹ "Visit the Carter Family Fold," RLROUSE Directory and Informational Resource, website, <https://www.rlrouse.com/bluegrass/carter-fold.html>, accessed May 27, 2021.

the area's rich vernacular culture within an academic institution had both initially and in the long term.

Before the introduction of this program, many young people from the Tri-Cities area were exposed to their musical heritage primarily through mainstream media productions such as the Beverly Hillbillies, as had been the case with Tim Stafford; yet, today, local youths and adults have in "the Bluegrass Program" a forum through which to participate in and learn their own musical traditions. Multiplatinum-selling country music artist, Kenny Chesney, from Luttrell, Tennessee, got his start in the program, having received his first guitar lesson from Jack Tottle.²⁰²

The long term impact of outreach and education program like ETSU's Bluegrass, Old-time, and Country Music Program cannot be underestimated as to generate community support for bigger and more expansive public history projects, especially ones that require community funding. When a culture or music, which for generations has been labelled or viewed as low brow or simplistic, receives respect and elevation, it signals to one and all that what makes this area unique or special possesses real meaning and importance. A small dividend to such a placement into cultural relevance lies in the attitude "Why wouldn't we want to celebrate, commemorate this history and culture and teach it to new generations of musicians and scholars?"

A second museum opened in the Grand Guitar store and visitor center, and was dedicated to the area's musical heritage and the Bristol Sessions in a unique building at the I-81 highway exit for Bristol, Tennessee. Joe Morrell built a seventy-foot replica of a Martin Dreadnought acoustic guitar in 1982 to house both his guitar shop, a small

²⁰² Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson, *The Bristol Sessions: Writings about the Big Bang of Country Music* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 264.

museum on the second floor, and a radio station. Morrell viewed his building as the Gateway to Bristol and the “Birthplace of Country Music.” The museum interpreted over two-hundred items from not only the Bristol Sessions but the region’s effect on popular music and culture. The museum remained opened until Morrell’s death in 2006. Despite the building being less than fifty years old, the National Register of Historic Places listed the Grand Guitar building in 2014 under criterion C for it was a “locally and regionally significant example of mimetic architecture.”²⁰³ Steve Johnson, a local real estate developer best known for the Pinnacle Shopping Center, purchased the building from the Morrell family in 2014 with every intent to rehabilitate and reopen the structure, thus the National Register nomination. Johnson stated, “Purchasing the Grand Guitar was a way for us to honor the city’s musical roots, and although we don’t have final development plans yet, we intend to restore it to the iconic piece of Americana it deserves.”²⁰⁴ However, Johnson could never obtain the necessary funds to undertake such a complex rehabilitation project in a building suffering years of neglect, vagrancy, and deterioration. Johnson authorized the demolition of the Grand Guitar building on August 16, 2019, but acknowledged that he had long before removed all of memorabilia from the store and museum.

²⁰³ Claudette Stager and Anita Morrell, “Grand Guitar Building, Bristol, Tennessee,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Tennessee Historical Commissions, 2014, nps.gov/nr/feature/places/14000057.htm, accessed September 25, 2018.

²⁰⁴ Robert Sorrell, “Landmark Grand Guitar Building Demolished,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, website, August 17, 2019, www.hearldcourier.com/news/landmark-grand-guitar-building-demolished.html, accessed August 19, 2019.

Bristol, the Birthplace of Country Music: A Poem and a Place

They say Nashville is the home of country music with this no doubt we'll all agree;
But let's don't forget that the birthplace is Bristol, Virginia - Tennessee.
Mac King, "Bristol the Birthplace of Country Music. Also the Birthplace of Tennessee
Ernie Ford."²⁰⁵

Within a few months of the openings of Grand Guitar and East Tennessee State University's Country music program, BCMF founder and board member, Mac King composed a poem entitled, "Bristol the Birthplace of Country Music. Also the Birthplace of Tennessee Ernie Ford" in 1983. King delivered a copy to his State Senator, Carl Moore. In the poem, King detailed the Bristol Sessions, the importance of the Carters, the Stonemans, and Jimmie Rodgers, as well as the other contributions to country music from the Bristol area. In the final stanza, King proclaimed, "They say Nashville is the home of country music with this no doubt we'll all agree; but let's don't forget that the birthplace is Bristol, Virginia - Tennessee."²⁰⁶ Within a year of its publication, State Senator Carl Moore sponsored Senate Joint Resolution No. 240, which passed on May 17, 1984. The resolution designated Bristol, Tennessee as the "Birthplace of Country Music," just as Mac King declared in his poem. In fact, the resolution contained some similar ideas, though historically inaccurate, including, "Whereas, while Nashville, Tennessee is nationally recognized as the capital of country music, Bristol is the city

²⁰⁵ Mac King, "Bristol the Birthplace of Country Music. Also the Birthplace of Tennessee Ernie Ford, 1983, author's collection.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

where country music was first commercially recorded.”²⁰⁷ By 1927, country music recordings appeared on various record labels for over five years.

Despite the years of effort to build and finance a museum, the Appalachian Music Museum closed in 1984. The museum’s ultimate failure laid with its location and inconsistency for access. Jocelyn Walter noted in the *Bristol Herald Courier*, “Since its opening, the museum has been used periodically for special country music events and to display artifacts used by local mountain musicians. The location of the museum, however, hindered attendance and made it a target for vandals.”²⁰⁸ Steele Creek Park is four miles from downtown Bristol and several miles from the interstate. Nor did Steele Creek Park have any historical or cultural connection to the museum’s subject matter. Tim White remembers the Appalachian Music Museum as, “Quaint. There wasn’t a lot to it. They had some interesting artifacts but you had to call in, by appointment and all that. Half the time you couldn’t reach someone, so they ended up closing it.”²⁰⁹ Within five years of its opening the BCMF decided to approach the City of Bristol, Tennessee to purchase the museum. The city council possessed mixed feelings about acquiring the museum because the BCMF only wanted the city to own the buildings, not manage the museum.

²⁰⁷ Senator Carl Moore, “Tennessee Senate Joint Resolution No. 240: A Resolution to: Designate Bristol, Tennessee as the ‘Birthplace of Country Music,’” State of Tennessee Senate, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives.

²⁰⁸ Jocelyn Walter, “Council Eyes Country Music Museum,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, undated, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

²⁰⁹ Tim White interview with author, February 8, 2018.

In the BCMF minutes dated June 21, 1985, the organization noted showing the museum cabin to Parks and Recreation officials, who thought it might be of use as “a good home for the Park Ranger or maybe moving it over to the golf course for use there.”²¹⁰ Eventually the BCMF sold the cabins for \$13,700 to State Senator Carl Moore, who uses it as a guesthouse on his EverMoore Farm in Bristol, Tennessee.²¹¹ The BCMF removed the artifacts from the museum and placed them into storage in Viking Hall, a public auditorium located next to the Bristol, Tennessee, High School.

The year 1985 proved a tough year for the foundation. Its Appalachian Music Days Festival only made twelve dollars in profit. The museum disbanded. But the Foundation found a new, more appropriate location for the 1971 Bristol Sessions monument. Since 1971 the monument had stood at the interstate, the Welcome Center, Anderson Park, and even “the Barn restaurant on US Highway 11 W where officials thought it would be more visible to those traveling to the [1982] World’s Fair in Knoxville.”²¹² The Foundation talked with officials of Rite Aid, the current owners of the

²¹⁰ “Country Music Foundation Minutes of the Meeting,” June 21, 1985, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

²¹¹ There are some conflicting accounts of who first purchased the cabins from the BCMF, though its eventual destination on the EverMoore Farm is not in doubt. In addition to my interview with Tim White, a note placed on an article about the selling of the cabin directly to Carl Moore. Linda Parker-Browder, an active member of the BCMF, the Rotary Club, and other civic organizations, and who collected many of the documents in the BCMM’s archive placed a Post-It note on a photo copy of Jocelyn Walter’s article. It states, “Council did not buy the museum however, Carl Moore did and had it moved to his farm and turned it into his guest house.” Additionally, the EverMoore farm in 2020 advertises overnight accommodations in its “1790 Cabin,” which looks exactly like the one used by the museum. www.evermoorefarm.com

²¹² Susan Cameron, “State Street to Get ‘Country’ Statue Back,” *Bristol Herald Courier / Virginia Tennessean*, July 31, 1985, Birthplace of Country Music Archive, 1A.

lot where the Taylor Christian Hat Company once stood and received its approval to relocate the monument to the 410 State Street address.²¹³

When the monument returned to State Street, the Appalachian Music Association, Bristol Country Music Foundation, and Downtown Bristol Association held a celebration that featured over forty-five bands performing throughout the city.²¹⁴ BCMF Vice-President Larry Hardiman noted the difference:

[Live music] distinguishes Bristol from other communities in the country and the world. This music is such a part of this area. Not only is the music authentic, but the people behind it are authentic. This festival is a way of carrying on this important heritage. It will be passed on from father to son just as it was passed on several hundred years ago.²¹⁵

The festival also featured a flea market, a Bingo tournament, health booths, and a rededication ceremony presided over by the two Mayors of Bristol.

In 1987, Nashville stepped in to bring international attention to the place of the Bristol Sessions in country music history. The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's record label, Country Music Foundation Records, released a two-LP collection entitled, *The Bristol Sessions*, that included all seventy-six commercially released recordings created during those two weeks in 1927. CMF Records released this collection on the sixtieth anniversary of the Bristol Sessions. The Country Music Hall of

²¹³ "Country Music Foundation Minutes of the Meeting," June 21, 1985, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

²¹⁴ The Appalachian Music Association was an arm of the Bristol Country Music Foundation dedicated to bluegrass and old-time music performance and enjoyment.

²¹⁵ Susan Cameron, "State Street to Get 'Country' Statue Back," *Bristol Herald Courier / Virginia Tennessean*, July 31, 1985, Birthplace of Country Music Archive, 14A.

Fame promoted its release throughout the world and especially within the country music establishment, as Mac King affirmed, “We've had a little trouble letting the rest of the world know.”²¹⁶ In addition to the album, Bristol organized a sixtieth anniversary concert that featured performances by Janette Carter, Kelly Lang, and Jim Ed Brown that attracted over 5,000 people.²¹⁷

That September 1987, Bristol officials presented Mac King with a plaque celebrating his lifetime of community leadership in promoting the Bristol music story. After King's death in December, the City of Bristol, Tennessee, several residents, and community organizations decided to sponsor a small museum dedicated to Mac King that featured many of the remaining artifacts from the Appalachian Music Museum at Viking Hall. In August 1988, Terry Smith, a city employee at Viking Hall, gave up an office to open the Mac King Country Music Museum. Smith also commissioned Tim White to paint a mural honoring King on one of the museum walls.²¹⁸ The museum attempted to trace the evolution of the region's role in the development of country music and honor the life and work of King by including his poem and interview tape with Cecil McClister, the music store owner who collaborated with Ralph Peer during the 1927 recordings. Additionally, the museum housed vintage media and musical instruments, and articles of

²¹⁶ “Country Music Facet of Bristol Celebration,” *Bristol Herald Courier / Virginia Tennessean*, September 30, 1987, Birthplace of Country Music Archive, 2.

²¹⁷ “Bristol Claims Country Music Birthplace,” *The Index-Journal*, September 27, 1987, p. 8, newspapers.com, accessed January 19, 2018.

²¹⁸ Susan Cameron, “Country Music Museum to Honor King,” *Bristol Herald Courier / Virginia-Tennessean*, May 23, 1988, Birthplace of Country Music Archive.

clothing from Ricky Skaggs, Hank Williams, Jr, and John Schneider, the lead actor from the *Dukes of Hazzard* television show who also recorded country music.²¹⁹

From the beginning, the Mac King Country Music Museum started as an underfunded, understaffed, and under-promoted effort that also included unreliable and often “by appointment” visiting hours. Tim White recalls visiting the Mac King Country Music Museum and its challenges.

I am guessing it lasted two to three years. I went over there one day to knock on the door to say I have these people from out of town and I'd like for them to see the museum and there was an office in there and the mural was painted over. I asked Terry what happened to the museum and she said, 'we needed the office space and put the artifacts back in the closet.' It wasn't Terry's fault but that is the powers that be then in the city. That's what they thought about it.²²⁰

The need for an appropriate museum to interpret Bristol's place in country and American music history remained.

When They Ring the Golden Bells: A Painting and a Birthplace

There's a land beyond the river, that we call the sweet forever
And we'll only reach that shore by faith's decree
One by one we'll gain the portals, there to dwell with the immortals
When they ring the golden bells for you and me.
Alfred G. Karnes, “When They Ring the Golden Bells.” 1927.²²¹

²¹⁹ Susan Cameron, “Bristol's Country Music Museum to Open, Honor Mac King,” *Bristol Herald Courier / Virginia-Tennessean*, August 4, 1988, Birthplace of Country Music Archive.

²²⁰ Tim White interview with author, February 8, 2018.

²²¹ Alfred G. Karnes, “When They Ring the Golden Bells,” by Dion De Marbelle, recorded on July 29, 1927, Victor 20933, 78 rpm.

The process to create a museum from 1971 to 1988 struggled. But public art, conceived by Tim White proved a turning point. His mural painted a few blocks from 410 State Street truly catalyzed and energized a steady forward momentum from an outdoor interpretation to a 24,000 square foot museum.

Tim White conceived of the idea to paint a large interpretation of the two-week recording session to both recognize the historic event and to help promote his sign shop, White's Signs in Blountville, in 1985. White chose the old Advance Store building owned by the city which was next to the transit transfer station on State Street. Because of its sizable parking lot, the property possessed a potential plaza area and thus a large profile from State Street. However, given the recent failures of recent interpretive efforts, the depressed state of the downtown location, and general public apathy and ignorance of the Bristol Sessions, creating the mural proved a challenge. White found fundraising difficult to help offset the cost of materials. He offered his labor, design, and talent free of charge. White eventually received \$3,000 from Paul Gibson at Bristol Jeans, \$100 from Bob Lark of Lark Amusements, \$50 from Hickory Tree Grocery, and Holston Hardware donated the paint.²²² The remaining funds came from White's own pocket.

On May 2, 1986, the city held an unveiling of the thirty by one-hundred foot mural, over 1,000 people attended the event; that evening Gary Morris and Sylvia performed in Viking Hall. The mural is a two story painting with a Victor Talking Machine record and WXBQ microphone in the center and painted interpretations of

²²² Tim White Interview with author, February 8, 2018.

promotional photos of the Carter Family and Ralph Peer on the left and Ernest and Hattie Stoneman and Jimmie Rodgers on the right. White titled it, “Bristol, Tenn-Va. / Birthplace / Country Music.” Bill Hartley, who later became a leading advocate for the opening of a permanent downtown museum, noted the reason for the more successful nature of the mural over previous interpretive attempts. “Tim’s mural put that [Bristol’s place in music history] in a more visually appealing way, something that made Bristol a destination that you could sell on a postcard or put into a magazine or an article when you were talking about Bristol.”²²³ David Carter of WXBQ radio concurred, “Bristol has finally received the recognition it’s deserved for a lot of years.”²²⁴

Tim White’s mural proved a more effective tool in the public interpretation of promoting and establishing Bristol’s place in country music history because, first, the mural always remained “open” and accessible. Second, the mural’s location was both closer to the actual site of the Bristol Sessions than any previous effort. Third, it focused clearly and solely on one aspect of the area’s music history, the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and clearly and unequivocally stated its historical significance: Bristol was the Birthplace of Country Music.

²²³ Bill Hartley interview with author, September 24, 2018.

²²⁴ Jeff Gill, “Hundreds Witness Unveiling of City’s Mural,” *Bristol Herald*, May 2, 1986, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives.

The Wandering Boy: The Birth of the Birthplace

Bring back my boy, my wandering boy
 Far, far away, wherever he may be
 Tell him his mother with faded cheeks and hair
 At their old home is waiting him there.
 The Carter Family, "The Wandering Boy." 1927.²²⁵

From 1989 until 1993, Tim White promoted the Jim and Jesse of the Grand Ole Opry Annual Bluegrass Festival in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Fred McClellan handled the concessions and people knew him for his chicken. White and McClellan began to talk about the history of the region, when McClellan suggested they start an organization. In 1994, White and McClellan established the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance (BMCA), holding its first meeting on the stage of the historic Paramount Theater, one block away from where the Ralph Peer held the 1927 Bristol Sessions. In a press conference held in April 1994, McClellan noted, "When you come to Bristol, the only two things you really have to remind you that this is the home of country music are a monument and a mural...The Birthplace of Country Music Alliance is being formed to honor and promote this historical event and the rich, diverse heritage of the area."²²⁶ The BCMA initially pursued those goals through the promotion of concerts in Bristol and the establishment of a scholarship that honored fiddler Benny Sims at East Tennessee State University's bluegrass studies program.

²²⁵ The Carter Family, "The Wandering Boy," by A. P. Carter, recorded on August 2, 1927, Victor 20877, 78 rpm.

²²⁶ Lesia Paine-Brooks, "City's Role in Music Focus of Effort," *Johnson City Press*, April 8, 1994, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

By 1996, the BCMA became an incorporated 501(c)(3) organization and possessed a board full of local leaders and music enthusiasts. The board consisted of President Fred McClellan, Treasurer Frank Carmack, Beulah Ferguson, Jody McCall, Cheryl Roh, Jean Speer, Tim Stafford, Paige Terry, Jack Tottle, Greg Wallace, Tim White, David Winship, and Robbie Wood. At its August 28, 1996, meeting one of the major topics of discussion lie in the establishment of a Birthplace of Country Music Museum in the Bristol Mall.²²⁷ Harry Essenwine, the mall's manager, offered space for one-dollar a year rent as long as the BCMA paid for electricity, liability insurance, and agreed to remain open during mall hours. The organization discussed the feasibility of a museum for the next year and a half until Essenwine called Tim White to inquire about its likelihood.

It wasn't a year or year and a half until Harry Essenwine, he was a hard crusty old Yankee from up in New England, he called me one day...He said, "Are you all going to do this thing with the museum or not? I said, 'Yeah.' I called James Bryant and I said that Harry is getting to the point where he may withdraw his offer for the free floor space, let's go build a museum. Let's get forgiveness instead of permission."²²⁸

While Tim White's recollection might be accurate, more formal discussions and proposals ensued that enumerated the endeavor to the BCMA board that it eventually approved around this time.

²²⁷ BCMA Minutes of Monthly Meeting, August 28, 1996, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

²²⁸ Tim White interview with author.

Harry Essenwine met with the BCMA board on February 10, 1998, and discussed the opportunity he offered the organization to open a museum with little to no overhead expenses other than insurance and electricity. The minutes for this meeting outline the particulars of this agreement.

The BCMA Mall Museum proposal was handed out by President [Tim] White. [The proposal is on file with the minutes]. President White advised the board that mall space is available [the old bank location] at a cost of \$1.00 per year. This opportunity for a mini museum is feasible due to the willingness of James Bryant of Bryant Labeling to sponsor the venture. James Bryant and Harry Essenwine of the Bristol Mall have agreed on a contract. After an in-depth discussion of the plan with all “pros and seemingly no cons,” Leton Harding moved that we proceed with the proposed museum based on an agreement document with James which will include a 30 day escape clause for both parties with an annual review by a special task appointed committee. The motion was seconded by Fred McClellan. The motion carried.²²⁹

While the minutes did not tabulate a vote count, the tone of the discussion appears it carried with an overwhelming majority, possibility with unanimity. However there was no discussion for or against the location of the museum being so far away from the original site. Most likely the reason lie in the financial opportunity presented by the Bristol Mall, which possessed better foot traffic at the time, and the scope of the museum broadened beyond the Bristol Sessions. The museum was to interpret all aspects of the region’s culture and musical heritage, which included Tennessee Ernie Ford, the *Farm and Fun Time* radio show and its stars, the Stanley Brothers. In the BCMA’s subsequent meeting in March, it formed a “Museum Design Committee,” to insure a professionally designed museum, which consisted of Tim Stafford, Dr. Jean Speer, Dave Winship, and

²²⁹ BCMA Minutes of Monthly Meeting, February 10, 1998, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

James Bryant.²³⁰ Also noted of significance in the minutes from this meeting was the ongoing lobbying effort by the organization with the both Virginia's and Tennessee's legislators to have the United States Congress designate the cities of Bristol as the "Birthplace of Country Music."

The lobbying effort for Congressional designation proved successful when on October 9, 1998, the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution recognizing the cities of Bristol as "The Birthplace of Country Music," introduced by Tennessee Congressman Bill Jenkins and Virginia Congressman Rick Boucher. The proclamation acknowledged the previous declaration made by the States of Tennessee and Virginia in previous years and made similar resolutions.

- (1) Recognizes the critical contributions of the cities of Bristol, Tennessee and Bristol, Virginia, and their residents to the origins and development of Country Music;
- (2) Congratulates the cities of Bristol, Tennessee and Bristol, Virginia, for launching with the Bristol Sessions of 1927 the careers of the Nation's first widely-known Country Music artists; and
- (3) Acknowledges and commends the cities of Bristol, Tennessee and Bristol, Virginia, as the birthplace of Country Music, a style of music which has enjoyed broad commercial success in the United States and throughout much of the world.²³¹

²³⁰ BCMA Minutes of Monthly Meeting, March 10, 1998, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

²³¹ Congressman Bill Jenkins Press Release, February 17, 1998, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

Margaret Feierabend, Bristol's Vice-Mayor observed, "This means we can...market ourselves - let people know this is who we are. It gives us a more definitive identity."²³² Soon both cities erected signs with the birthplace declaration and included it in its literature and advertisements. In addition to the federal recognition of the cities of Bristol made at the end of 1998, the BCMA possessed other business to attend to in the nation's capital the following year with the Smithsonian Institute and National Folklife Festival. But in the meantime, the pending opening of its museum presented the most pressing concern.

The BMCA took advantage of the attention derived from the Congressional recognition and announced its plans for the museum in the Bristol Mall set to open in March 1999. While the 1927 Bristol Sessions served as the museum's centerpiece, the BCMA stated that education and outreach remained its primary purpose. Tim White also acknowledged that one day the museum might move to a downtown location on or near the original site of the historic recording sessions on State Street. In addition, the museum would feature artifacts and displays from musicians who possessed ties to the cities of Bristol and the region including Kenny Chesney, who first recorded in Bristol, Tennessee, Ernie Ford, the Stanley Brothers, and Dave Loggins, amongst others.²³³

²³² Associated Press, "U.S. House Certifies Bristol as Country Music's Birthplace," *Johnson City Press*, October 13, 1998, p. 9, newspapers.com, accessed June 7, 2021.

²³³ Ann Grundon, "BCMA Unveils Plans to Preserve Twin City's Musical Heritage; Museum, Celebration in the Works," *Bristol Herald Courier*, October 17, 1998, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

The BMCA announced the museum's opening date at the Bristol Mall was March 9, 1999, Jim & Jesse McReynolds and the Lewis Family performed at the inaugural "Pickin' Porch," a live music stage that became a key feature of the Bristol Mall facility.

When we opened it and I am not exaggerating, there was at least two-thousand people and they were cramming the corridors at that mall and it was absolutely wonderful. Which proved the point that there was this undertow and the people were very excited about it. But you know museums are not money makers. You have to have it funded somehow, so we started the Pickin' Porch, which was James Bryant's idea. He said, "I don't want to just look at the past, I want to look at the future and the future is live music. So we had school bands, kids, national touring acts, and that was pretty much our life-blood for a long, long time - the Pickin' Porch."²³⁴

The Pickin' Porch organized a regular Thursday night event. While the press and general attitude were overwhelmingly positive, most acknowledged the location's shortcomings: "Organizers acknowledge the setting doesn't exactly fit the museum's historical theme, but they hope the location will attract visitors."²³⁵ However, visitors remained impressed with the museum's design and its important artifacts: "Ralph Stanley's green and gold sport coat, the late Carter Stanley's Stetson hat, and Sara Carter's guitar. There are handmade violins, mandolins, dulcimers, and other instruments from the collection of Joe Morrell."²³⁶ Soon after its opening, Patsy Stoneman donated the first records that her father and mother [Ernest and Hattie Stoneman] created at the 1927 session. Despite the enthusiasm for the museum and its eventual Smithsonian affiliation, it lacked an overall

²³⁴ Tim White interview with author, February 8, 2018.

²³⁵ Associated Press, "Bristol Hosts Birthplace of Country Music Museum," *The News Leader* (Staunton, Virginia), March 8, 1999, p. 1, newspapers.com, accessed January 19, 2018.

²³⁶ Angela K. Brown, "Locals to Be Featured in Museum," *Johnson City Press*, March 8, 1999, p. 7, newspapers.com, accessed June 7, 2021.

air of professionalism, according to academia. A review in the *Appalachian Journal* concluded: “The small space and less than professional exhibit and case construction are an injustice for the treasure of objects and information found here...Unfortunately, the self-guided museum is cramped and feels cluttered.”²³⁷ Despite such critiques, the board headed to Washington, DC for a series of productive meetings with government officials and the Smithsonian Institute to further the mission and awareness of the new Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

Big Bend Gal: The Museum Eyes Historic Downtown Bristol

Ain't no use talkin' 'bout the Big Bend gal
 Who lives on the county line.
 For Betsy came from the prairie plain
 Just to leave them way behind.
 The Shelor Family, "Big Bend Gal." 1927.²³⁸

Several members of the BCMA board, including Tim White, Fred McClellan, and Leton Harding travelled to Washington, DC in December 1999. They met with various executives with the Smithsonian Institution to discuss an affiliation agreement. Michael Carrigan of the Smithsonian offered to ‘fast-track’ the affiliation and presented the BCMA with a list of requirements to meet its standards. The *Bristol Herald Courier*

²³⁷ Theresa Burchett-Anderson, “Museum Review: Birthplace of Country Music Alliance Museum. Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia,” *Appalachian Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall 2005), 127-8, www.jstor.org/stable/40934784, accessed January 25, 2018

²³⁸ The Shelor Family, "Big Bend Gal," by J. B. Blackhead, recorded on August 3, 1927, Victor 20865, 78 rpm.

newspaper agreed to pay the one-time \$2,500 application fee. Additionally, the board members met with Richard Kurin of the National Folklife Festival regarding its decision to designate 2003 “The Year of Appalachia” and to send area musicians, craftspeople, and storytellers to Washington, DC to perform and display their works for the two-week event. Kurin also proposed Bristol as the site for its 2002 festival.²³⁹ While Bristol did not hold the 2002 festival, its central presence was a major component of the 2003 festival in Washington, DC.

Upon their return to Bristol, the board members reported on the various meetings. It is important to note that at that December 14, 1999, meeting a discussion began regarding moving the museum downtown. Leton Harding reported that he scheduled a meeting with Congressman Boucher “regarding the BCMA making an option to buy the Rite-Aid property.”²⁴⁰ Rite Aid operated a drug store on the Taylor-Christian Hat Company site. Rite-Aid recently had moved to another location, leaving its State Street location vacant.

Where the warehouse had once stood, it caught fire in the 40s, and the building next to it was Bunting’s Drug Store, which in the 90s was the oldest operational drug store in the state of Tennessee. It was bought out and torn down to build a brand new Rite Aid drug store. I think after that, that’s when you really start to see that we (the BCMA) needed interest in downtown and its history, because you had Bunting’s torn down, you had a lot of other buildings torn down.²⁴¹

²³⁹ BCMA Minutes of Monthly Meeting, December 14, 1998, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Bill Hartley interview with author via phone, October 10, 2018.

Throughout the meeting the board discussed different possibilities to acquire the property and the board secured \$2,000 from its bank to offer as an option to buy the Rite-Aid lot. The BCMA failed in its bid, but remained focused on an appropriate downtown location. Only a few months after the Bristol Mall museum opening, the editorial board of the *Bristol Herald Courier* opined: “It’s not hard to see that done properly, a country-music heritage museum could draw an awful lot of visitors. As such, it could even be the keystone for a revitalized downtown.”²⁴²

In 2000, the Smithsonian Institute awarded the Birthplace of Country Music Museum with an affiliation status. Once a museum follows the Smithsonian’s guidelines, it then shares resources and loans artifacts to its affiliate member. At a press conference held at the Bristol Mall museum, the BCMA announced to a large crowd, including Janette Carter, Doyle Lawson, Mike Seeger, and Rita Carter Forrester, that it was launching \$500,000 fund raising campaign. It soon hired its first paid employee, Hancel Woods. The BMCA charged Woods with administering the business of the museum and organization, fundraising, outreach, and grant writing. The following year, it hired its second staff member, University of Tennessee History PhD student, Bill Hartley. Also of note during this time was the organization and presentation of the inaugural Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion festival held in downtown Bristol in October 2001.

The 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC centered its two-week celebration around the theme of “Appalachia: Heritage and Harmony” with the

²⁴² “Bristol Should Follow Pop Stoneman’s Lead,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, June 27, 1999, Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

thesis that this region gave birth to country music. Thus, it worked closely with the BCMA and the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University to present music and crafts that reflected the Bristol and Mountain Empire region and the 1927 recordings. While country music served as the centerpiece for the festival, the festival showcased music and crafts from the diverse cultural streams of the region. In addition to Appalachia, the Smithsonian Folklife festival presented the cultural wealth of Scotland and Mali, which were on either side of the Appalachia area. While the music and culture of its festival neighbors played an influence on Appalachia, many visitors either failed to make those connection or made them in an exaggerated and miscalculated manner as to its overall effect.

Overall, visitors reported that the “Appalachia: Heritage and Harmony” program challenged negative stereotypes of the region and increased their respect for Appalachian culture. At the same time, visitors, including those who had spent a considerable amount of time at the festival, tended to perceive the region as a rural and static “cultural preserve” protected against commercial mass culture. Visitors to the Appalachia program regularly acknowledged historical ties between Scotland and Appalachia but far less consistently grasped links between Appalachia and Mali or western Africa. For a disconcerting number of visitors, recognition of Scottish influence led to an exaggerated impression of present-day Appalachia as almost wholly “Scottish” in nature.²⁴³

While some made the right and many the incorrect connections, what visitors saw and experienced in the Appalachia section helped in furthering the message and mission of the BCMA. People not only from all parts of the United States, but the world, possessed the opportunity to sample and partake in a positive presentation of the

²⁴³ Emily Satterwhite, “‘That’s What They’re Singing About’: Appalachian Heritage, Celtic Pride, and American Nationalism at the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival,” *Appalachian Journal*, Vol 32 No 3 (Spring 2005), 305, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40934418>, accessed January 25, 2018.

historical and current arts, music, and culture of this region and learn about more experiential opportunities that the Bristol and Mountain Empire Region could offer any visitor. But while the museum and the mall with its vibrant Pickin' Porch series offered some of that, it lacked authenticity and the gravitas that an interpretation close to or on the original site offered. Place plays an important role in satisfying the senses and experiences of a visitor that even the best panel or artifact cannot replicate as the visitor cannot envision the history occurring at an overtly commercial and modern shopping mall only a few miles away from the historical event at its center. The majority of the members of the BCMA were well aware of this disconnect, but the drive to move downtown as it began to gather steam caused a "split in the church"²⁴⁴ among the board. One faction of the BCMA desired a move downtown and were prepared for the massive undertaking and fundraising that it entailed. The other faction felt such a concerted effort took away from the organization's mission which not only preserved the past but supported the future of Appalachian music and culture that such an expensive undertaking potentially diminished.

²⁴⁴ The description of this period as a "split in the church" was used uniformly in the author's interviews with Tim White, Bill Hartley, and Leah Ross when each recounted the events after the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the BCMA's effort to move the Birthplace of Country Music Museum to its present downtown location.

Skip to Ma Lou, My Darling: The Church Splits

Yonder she comes and how do you do?
 Yonder she comes skip to my Lou my darling
 You've got money and I have too
 You've got money skip to my Lou
 You've got money and I have too
 Skip to my Lou my darling.
 Uncle Eck Dunford, Hattie Stoneman, and Iver Edwards, "Skip to Ma Lou, My Darling."
 1927.²⁴⁵

At a press conference held on September 2, 2004, Bill Hartley and the BCMA announced the acquisition of 520 Cumberland Street in Bristol, Virginia. Steve Johnson of Johnson and Associates, the owner of the 520 Cumberland Street building, donated the property to the BCMA to "serve as the future home of the Birthplace of Country Music Cultural Heritage Center, which will house the organization's museum, as well as serve as a center for the organization's performances, educational activities, and other programming."²⁴⁶ Steve Johnson purchased the building in hopes of razing it and building a parking garage to serve both his and other downtown businesses. However, the city passed an ordinance due to its location in a historic district that prevented Johnson from demolishing it. By the time the BCMA and Johnson consummated the building acquisition, the BCMA was already actively seeking a presence in downtown Bristol.

²⁴⁵ Uncle Eck Dunford, Hattie Stoneman, and Iver Edwards, "Skip to Ma Lou Ma Darling," by Uncle Eck Dunford, recorded on July 27, 1927, Victor 20938, 78 rpm.

²⁴⁶ "BCMA to Hold Press Conference to Announce Donation of Facility to House New Cultural Heritage Center," BCMA press release, August 27, 2004, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

Before acquiring the 520 Cumberland Street building, the BCMA studied the possible use of the recently renovated train station in early 2004. The BCMA approached Dr. Carroll Van West of the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University who submitted “Heritage Development and the Country Music Story of Bristol, Tennessee: Recommendations” to the BCMA and recommended LaPaglia & Associates as consultants. West did state that he believed the BCMA could operate its exhibition, live music promotions, and a gift shop in a portion of the railway station, which held an association with the Bristol Sessions, but more as a heritage center rather than a history museum. “Since a smaller portion of the building - rather than most of the building - is reserved for permanent exhibitory, the heritage center approach saves on artifact storage and conservation needs.”²⁴⁷

LaPaglia believed that the train station was too small and its abundance of windows created too many design issues for proper artifact maintenance. “The Railroad Station is not large enough and does not fit the current nor the future needs of the museum. We recommend that a new location in downtown Bristol be considered by the staff and board of the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance.”²⁴⁸ LaPaglia, who stood to benefit from designing a museum, estimated the need for over 30,000 square feet of

²⁴⁷ Dr Carroll Van West, “Heritage Development and the Country Music Story of Bristol, Tennessee: Recommendations,” June 15, 2004, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, p. 5, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives.

²⁴⁸ “Birthplace of Country Music Museum Consultant Report,” LaPaglia & Associates, June 2004, p. 4, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archives.

exhibition floor space and should strive for first class accommodations throughout its structure.

Both West and LaPaglia agreed that the train station's location so close to an active railroad track will create an uncomfortable and unstable environment and the preponderance of windows presented a preservation challenge. LaPaglia presented the following conclusion regarding the train station as a museum location.

While the building has an attractive exterior, the interior would force the museum to be located on three small floors with remote restrooms, no storage space, no loading area for traveling exhibitions, and limited parking. This building would be better used as offices for community organizations.²⁴⁹

With that, the board and staff of the BCMA scoured downtown Bristol for another location.

While walking the Virginia side of downtown Bristol, the BCMA identified the abandoned 520 Cumberland Street building as a possibility. The brick and concrete structure at the time was located in the Bristol Commercial Historic District²⁵⁰ and dated back to 1924 when it served as the location of the Va-Tenn Motor Corporation, a Chrysler and Plymouth auto dealership, parts, and repair shop. So while not the original location of the 1927 sessions, the building existed during that historic event and only a few blocks away. It is reasonable to imagine any of the sessions participants strolling by it to take aspirational looks at Chrysler 70 Coaches and Dodge Coupes.

²⁴⁹ "Birthplace of Country Music Museum Consultant Report," LaPaglia & Associates, p. 8.

²⁵⁰ The National Register listed the district on May 22, 2003.

Bill Hartley recalls, “We saw that building and in fact we went over to city hall and talked to the planner and city manager at the time...we asked to speak to Steve Johnson who owned that building. ‘Yeah he owns that building and he bought it for a purpose he can’t use it for.’”²⁵¹ Hartley recounts that the meeting with the BCMA and Johnson went well and he agreed to donate the building right then, which was around August of 2004. The building, however was not in a turn-key condition. Johnson removed all the windows prior to the donation, the roof had partially collapsed, and the building counted pigeons, rats, and vagrants as residents. Given the acquisition of the building and its condition, which needed immediate attention, the BCMA focused its energy on raising the funds for the building of a downtown museum and all the planning and coordination that went along with it. However, with the organization’s energy largely trained on downtown, several founding members eventually decided to leave and form a new museum and nonprofit organization, the Appalachian Cultural Music Association.

To BCMA founders Tim White, James Bryant and a few other BCMA members, the largess of the move downtown took away from the organization’s mission, even though both had been a part of the discussions to move downtown since the late 1990s. The White and Bryant contingency did not possess an interest in a long-term fundraising and development project, both preferred the way in which the organization operated prior to and including the Bristol Mall museum.

Tim White and that group said it [the BCMA and Birthplace of Country Music Museum] was about the music and performance and not so much about a

²⁵¹ Bill Hartley interview with author.

museum or particularly downtown...he [Tim White] was more performance based, where other people were place based and wanted to move it more into downtown Bristol and really tap what the potential could be from a tourism and educational side. And you still have the performance aspect but he was more about, "You could do this anywhere as long as there was music and you could have shows wherever." That is just his background as a musician and a promoter.²⁵²

The White and Bryant contingency stayed on the BCMA board for another year before leaving in 2005 to start the Appalachian Cultural Music Association (ACMA), which eventually became the Mountain Music Museum, in the same location in the Bristol Mall with many of the same artifacts and interpretative panels. As a part of the split, the ACMA retained ownership of the Pickin' Porch music series.

Despite the split away from the organization he helped to found, Tim White only wished them well. While it may seem controversial that a founding member of the BCMA not only leaves the organization but starts a 'competing' organization, it was an honest assessment of one's desire and skills to leave. Better to remove oneself if the passion or direction no longer suits one's interest or skillset, than remain either serving as an impediment or a half-hearted participant.

When they [the BCMA] accepted the gift of the building from Steve Johnson I was there another year. But what happened as far as I am concerned...I am on good terms with them, heck I founded the organization and I wanted them to be successful and I am proud of what they have done. But they for basically a decade, in my opinion, lost sight of the mission statement. However, they did what they had to do. They had to raise twelve to fourteen million dollars and that is all they spent their time on. I told them I am not here for that. I am here to make music. So that is why James Bryant and I branched off. We continued for near a decade, we carried the torch, because we still had visitors coming to the

²⁵² Bill Hartley interview with author.

Bristol Mall. So during that interim period of them raising the money to start this fabulous museum they got here, we kind of carried the torch, kept the lamp lit even though we were a lot smaller than what they got now, we kept it going.²⁵³

The ACMA continued to operate in its Bristol Mall location until 2012 when it moved, somewhat ironically, to a downtown Bristol location on State Street around when and near where the new Birthplace of Country Music Museum opened. It remained there until 2017, when the Mountain Music Museum, the ACMA, and the Pickin' Porch relocated to Kingsport, Tennessee. Sadly and predictably, the Mountain Music Museum permanently closed in August 2019, as the cost of maintaining the space exceeded expected revenue. If not then, then it would have found the COVID-19 crisis a few months later a further unclimbable obstacle. The ACMA returned loaned artifacts and attempted to find homes for others in its collection, though it stated it will continue to promote concerts and festivals in the area, the main area of interest from the beginning for Tim White.²⁵⁴ White continues to host *Song of the Mountains*, a monthly concert series held in the Lincoln Theater in Marion, Virginia. The series is broadcast on almost two-hundred Public Broadcasting Service affiliates. White and Joe Ellis started the series in 2005 and one of his first underwriters was early BCMA member James Bryant through the Bryant Label Company

In its October-December 2004 newsletter, the BCMA outlined its plans for the newly acquired downtown building as its permanent home. It noted that of the seven

²⁵³ Tim White interview with author.

²⁵⁴ "Mountain Music Museum Closes in Kingsport," WCYB-TV, August 6, 2019, <https://wcyb.com/news/local/mountain-music-museum-closes-in-kingsport>, accessed June 1, 2021.

major sites on Virginia's popular "Crooked Road" heritage music trail, only the Birthplace of Country Music Museum lacked a permanent facility, which the recently acquired 24,000 square foot building from Steve Johnson solved.

After organizing the Appalachian musical portion of the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the BCMA revisited its mission statement and made the determination that its next step was to find an adequate permanent home for the organization in order to further fulfill its mission. Through grants provided by the Virginia Commission for the Arts, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the National Endowment for the Arts Growth Fund, museum consultants were retained to assist in determining a plan of action to aid in the complex process of implementing the plan. 'As far back as 1971 with the dedication of the monument on State Street near the site of the Bristol Sessions, the community has recognized the need for a country music museum downtown. Today, we take the first step in fulfilling that long-standing goal,' noted BCMA Executive Director Bill Hartley.²⁵⁵

The BCMA and Bristol Chamber of Commerce noted that the downtown museum should attract around 75,000 visitors each year and have as much as a six-million dollar positive impact on the Bristol economy. The BCMA spent the first year of building ownership focused on working with museum consultant and designers on "temporary and permanent exhibits that trace the history, cultural influences, and development of country music through a sequence of audio-visual experiences which will allow visitors the opportunity to listen to the melodies and encounter the rich musical tradition first hand."²⁵⁶ The BCMA received grants, including one for \$124,544 from the Virginia Tobacco

²⁵⁵ "BCMA Announces Donation of Building to House Cultural Heritage Center," *Newsletter of the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance Newsletter*, October-December 2004, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives.

²⁵⁶ "Plans for Cultural Heritage Center Estimated to Bring Economic Impact of \$40 Million," *Bristol Chamber of Commerce Quarterly Membership Update*, circa 2005, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archive.

Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission, to assist in developing a strategic plan and the hiring of an architect and consultant.

The plan and architectural renderings, the BCMA thought those would help in fundraising. With the initial grants, the BCMA hired Peyton Boyd and Harry McKinney to provide design services, as both successfully worked on several well-received regional arts and historical projects. The BCMA also contracted with LaPaglia and Associates to develop an interpretative master plan. In addition to a museum, the BCMA wanted to have a performance space, educational center, gift shop, and administrative offices. Accomplishing all those tasks would take almost another decade.

While both city governments expressed support for the move downtown, both balked at the \$250,000 requested from each city. The BCMA needed support from both local governments serious in order to then reach out to state, national, and private funds and donors. After all, why should those agencies and donors support something that unless the local governments and citizens put money on the table? Bristol, Tennessee Mayor Jim Messier stated, “I don’t know if the cities are going to do it. I’m sure we’ll give them some seed money, but I don’t know if giving them money, to the extent they’re asking for, is a proper use of taxpayer dollars.”²⁵⁷ Several subsequent letters to the newspapers and articles agreed with the need for the BCMA to seek funding from other sources than its local citizenry through tax dollars. One even suggested going on the road and soliciting donors from Sevierville (which can only mean Dolly Parton), Nashville,

²⁵⁷ David McGhee, “BCMA Renewing Call for Assistance,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, July 14, 2005, p. A5, Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives.

and other country music industry centers. Eventually both cities' government councils declined to support the BCMA with its \$500,000 request though both paid supportive lip service to the project as a whole. Bristol, Virginia committed \$25,000 towards the project with a promise to revise if more money became available. Again, the local paper's editorial section applauded the lack of financial support from the city governments and "The project needs a recognizable name attached to it, not \$500,000 in taxpayer support."²⁵⁸

Despite the lack of local public financial support, the BCMA used its Tobacco Commission money to move forward with a design and strategic plan and unveiled its vision in September 2005. The BCMA's architects, consultants, and board estimated the overall cost of building the Birthplace of Country Music Museum and Cultural Center at approximately \$9.5 million dollars. It estimated the cost of construction at \$4.1 million, the cost of exhibits at \$3.9 million, and design cost at \$1.4 million. With a planned 2007 opening date, the BCMA also announced its move into financing and fundraising by "retaining a financial consultant to develop fundraising efforts and (to) look at this community and its ability to sustain something the scope of this project."²⁵⁹

Over the next year or two, the BCMA secured around six million dollars of the estimated ten million needed to complete the museum and heritage center. The Virginia Tobacco Commission increased its contribution to two million dollars. Virginia

²⁵⁸ Editorial Board, "Leaders Wise to Wait on Museum," *Bristol Herald Courier*, July 23, 2005, p. A6, Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

²⁵⁹ David McGhee, "Design Unveiled for Music Museum," *Bristol Herald Courier*, September 30, 2005, p. A1 and A7, Birthplace of Country Music Archive.

Congressman Rick Boucher helped secure another two million dollars from the Rural Development Fund. Additional funds came from other private and public sources, including a large donation from the J. Henry Kegley Foundation's Challenge Grant program. Despite a lack of local public funds, the BCMA progressed positively towards its end goal and began to solicit donations from private and individual donations when the economy collapsed in 2007.

At that point it became hard to fund the project and sustain the organization. That is when I got laid off. And that is when you had discussions among the [Bristol] Rhythm and Roots Reunion festival and Birthplace of Country Music Alliance to form the Birthplace of Country Music, which I was glad to see... [both organizations] are two sides of the same coin. The missions were very similar, they're [BR&RR] trying to tell the story of Bristol to celebrate its unique heritage... You need the big event that somebody can start - if they can only come downtown once a year. They listen to music and see how it's evolved over time. But you also need the thing that's giving you the interpretation, the background of that, and something that's an attraction that is open 365... You need that something for people to come to on a regular basis so they can see, learn, and experience as well.²⁶⁰

Eerily similar to how the BCMA began largely as the result of a chance meeting at a music festival, the same serendipitous meeting occurred that led to the successful and fruitful merger of the BCMA and the Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion Festival - underscoring the incredible value of an active live music scene and heritage to the success of a museum and heritage center.

Before discussions of a merger commenced, the BCMA began interior demolition of non-structural interior walls and replaced the roof in the latter half of 2008 into early

²⁶⁰ Bill Hartley interview with author, October 10, 2018.

2009. At the same time, fundraising moved forward at a snail's pace. The BCMA possessed approximately \$6.4 million in funds appropriated to the museum, but little to no funds to either complete the project or fund the organization. It needed a bit of a shake-up, which came from a merger of like-minded organizations. That merger occurred largely as the result of a chance meeting at the Border Bash concert when John Rainero of the BCMA approached Leah Ross of the Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion Festival. Border Bash is the annual summer bi-weekly concert series held in downtown Bristol. While the BCMA stalled in large part due to the 2008 financial crisis, the Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion Festival continued to thrive with its annual downtown festival. "Hey Leah, have you ever thought about the BCMA and Rhythm and Roots merging? And I went 'Hell no!'" But we kept talking as they tried to raise money to build the museum," recalls Leah Ross.²⁶¹ The talks continued for almost two years and in December 2012, the two organizations officially announced a merger. Within two years, the newly formed organization named the Birthplace of Country Music (BCM) completed the necessary fundraising and opened the museum in August 2014.

The BCM raised both public and private funding. In addition to the funds from the Tobacco Commission and ARC, both cities made a five year commitment of \$500,000 at a \$100,000 a year schedule. To date, Bristol, Tennessee fulfilled its half-million dollar commitment while Bristol, Virginia has not. The cities of Bristol began its change of heart towards the downtown museum in 2008 as it attempted to improve the two cities'

²⁶¹ Leah Ross interview with author February 7, 2018.

brand identity to out-of-towners. The two pillars of its efforts revolved around motor sports and music, of which a downtown Birthplace of Country Music Museum fulfilled the latter. Bristol, Tennessee City Manager, Jeff Broughton, argued that even though there was not yet a place, only plans and an empty building, it had to “take steps now. We’ve got to let them taste it, smell it, see it. We need to make downtown ground zero for the Birthplace of Country Music.”²⁶² A major change in attitude from a mere four years prior, but an economic crisis leads to new ways of thinking to overcome pressing financial deficiencies.

The BCM leveraged the local commitment to persuade both state’s governors to appropriate \$500,000 each in its annual budget. While Tennessee approved the funding, Virginia proved a tougher nut to crack, but crack it did. When the appropriation reached the finance committee, its chairman, Thomas ‘Tag’ Greason, cut the funds from the budget. The BCM both hired a lobbyist to resolve that matter and its members attended Arts Advocacy Day at the Virginia State Legislature in Richmond. Ross and the BCM members dropped in Greason’s office without an appointment. Ross recalls the impromptu meeting.

We went around the corner to his office and I was introduced to him [Rep. Greason]. ‘I think I got some letters from you,’ he said. Yes, and he said, ‘What can I do for you?’ I said, ‘You know what you can do for me and I am not going to beat around the bush. We really need you to approve that. We received money from the State of Tennessee. We got that because it was in the Governor’s [Bob

²⁶² Gary B. Gray, “Bristol Poised to Push Music ‘Brand’,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, June 18, 2008, p. B1, Birthplace of Country Music Museum archive.

McDonnell] budget before he left office and it was taken out. I'd appreciate it if you'd give it your support and get it back in there. And he did.²⁶³

Ross attributes much of the success in these efforts to face-to-face meetings and advocacy. Virginia's total commitment to the museum project totaled \$3.5 million. In addition to historic tax credits and grants from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the U. S. National Park Service, the BCM raised over \$300,000 from individuals donating \$520 in its Friends of 1927 program.²⁶⁴

With the fundraising completed and the designs in place, construction commenced and the Birthplace of Country Music Museum opened on August 1, 2014. Within a year of its opening, the BCM launched its third division, Radio Bristol in August 2015, which to date remains a part of the museum's permanent exhibition. In addition to a low power FM signal, the station simulcasts its programming over the internet and through its app and other streaming services.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Leah Ross interview with author.

²⁶⁴ The dollar figure of 520 corresponds to the address of the building, 520 Cumberland St of the future Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

²⁶⁵ "About: Radio Bristol," Birthplace of Country Music Museum website, <https://birthplaceofcountrymusic.org/about/>, accessed July 1, 2021.

Sleep, Baby, Sleep: The Museum Successfully Opens Downtown

Sleep, baby, sleepy
 Close your bright eyes
 Listen to your mother, dear
 Sing these lullabies.
 Jimmie Rodgers, "Sleep, Baby, Sleep." 1927.²⁶⁶

The Birthplace of Country Music Museum, a Smithsonian Affiliate, is a 24,000 square foot museum that commemorates the historic 1927 Bristol Sessions. The museum is a few blocks north of the original location of the Bristol Sessions in a restored and period correct building. Similar recorded music history museums in Tennessee, such as Sun Studio: The Birthplace of Rock and Roll, Historic RCA Studio B, and the Stax Museum of American Soul, provide the experience of standing in the location of the sessions surrounded by artifacts from the studio and era. The Birthplace of Country Music chose not to recreate the recording space due to lack of documentary evidence and photographs. However, the absence of reification affords the Birthplace of Country Music Museum a freedom to interpret and personalize the sessions. The design from Hillman & Carr provides multiple points of entry to entice visitors of different interests and backgrounds while not disappointing music historians and fans who seek to revel in a location and artifact exact experience.

The museum's 12,000 square foot exhibition space begins on the second floor. After the patron ascends the staircase, they arrive in an open and light-filled atrium with

²⁶⁶ Jimmie Rodgers, "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," by S. A. Emery, recorded October 7, 1927, Victor 20864, 78 rpm.

exhibits that provide the historical and cultural context surrounding the Bristol Sessions. The first exhibit presented is an interactive kiosk that allows the patron to explore many aspects of late nineteenth and early twentieth century history of the region. A larger contextual timeline is to the right of the kiosk. The timeline juxtaposes the history of sound recording with this histories of Bristol and the United States between 1860 and 1930.

Behind the atrium, the museum recreates a turn of the century train station lobby where the patron awaits entry into theater to watch the introductory film. Here the museum uses the “Arrivals” placard to acknowledge that Bristol did not serve as the first place that recorded early country music. The introductory film explores the history of the 1927 Bristol Sessions and why they are considered significant, resulting in the “The Birthplace of Country Music” and “The Big Bang of Country Music” designations. The film, also, introduces the theme of country music’s circular tradition based on the Carter Family’s popular recording of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”²⁶⁷ The circular nature of music and culture serves as the thesis for the museum’s curatorial decisions and design.

The museum uses the center of the space for interactive displays and gathering points for patrons to meet and converse. Displays and artifacts are positioned closer to the wall to compliment the social and communal center. The first exhibition in the main space is entitled “The 1927 Bristol Recordings.” The museum invites the patron to use one of the provided headphones or to plug in their own set into one of the four

²⁶⁷ The Crater Family recorded “Can the Circle Be Unbroken” for Victor Records in its Camden, New Jersey studio the following year.

touchscreen displays. The display presents every recording from the ten day session (seventy-six recordings, of which the Victor Talking Machine Company released sixty-nine) and offers the ability to search by time, artist, and song title. In addition to the historical reference points, one can explore the music through different and more personal criteria that doesn't require familiarity with the artists or the era. Visitors can discover music based on lyrical themes, such as betrayal, drinking, or faith. The interactive also allows visitors to learn more about the artists, see the lyrics for each song, and delve into other details about the recordings. The narrative of the multimedia displays on either side of the listening kiosk discusses the Bristol Sessions players and other American vernacular music of the period, such as race and spiritual.

The second exhibit area covers the musicality of the period and the sessions. Several display cases contain period and genre correct instruments, though none were used during the Bristol Sessions. The Greasy String Theater is behind the musical instrument display and provides an incredibly and surprisingly insightful contextualization. The contemporary musicians in the film discuss both the musicality of the Bristol recordings and the history and culture behind the songs and musical heritage. They observe that the Bristol Session recordings are not only a document of 1927 country music, but the culmination of decades of oral histories passed down to the musicians.

The next exhibit area addresses the concepts of place and community in early twentieth-century Bristol. This area discusses the themes of "People, Place, and Music Making: The Roles of Community, Labor, and Faith in Appalachia" and "Singing the

Story of Grace: The Influence on the Bristol Sessions and Beyond.” The later section includes a small recreation of a church that invites the patron to enter, sit in one of the pews, and watch a short film about the topic. The most intriguing display in this section is entitled “Shared Spaces: Collected Memories of Community Life.” Here, the museum displays “The images and items in this space (that) speak to us about what it means to be a part of our many communities.”²⁶⁸ The museum invites the public to share their “photographs, paper items, or small objects that show how you, your family, or your friends are involved in the life of your community.”²⁶⁹ The museum succeeds throughout in breaking the fourth wall between the patron and the curators by inviting them to touch and interact with the various displays, but here they break down the wall of time. They ask the public to apply the themes of this section to their own experiences and thoughts on community.

The second half of the museum covers sound recording and mass media. The sound recording section provides several interactive exhibits. The center of the space offers several touch screen displays that allow the patron to remix various parts of a few recreated recordings by students and faculty from nearby East Tennessee State University. An interactive listening station adjacent to the remix kiosk “invite(s) you to listen to a small sampling of Bristol Sessions songs that other artists have made their

²⁶⁸ “Shared Spaces: Collected Memories of Community Life,” The Birthplace of Country Music Museum, Bristol, VA, October 14, 2014.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

own.”²⁷⁰ This station includes artists from multiple genres and eras that solidifies the circular theme.

The most popular exhibit in this section remains the recording booth. The museum patron can record themselves singing along with one of three songs from the Bristol Sessions. The museum made a powerful choice to allow those recordings to exist for only as long as the patron is in the booth. The museum does not archive the recordings nor offer them as souvenirs for later purchase. This choice focuses on the fun of participation, the experience of recording, and removes all feelings of self-consciousness.

This section is rounded out with exhibits that include country music’s presence in television and movies over the last fifty years and a recreated radio station, Radio Bristol, that broadcasts live on a low power FM frequency and the internet.

The final section brings the music, culture, and patron into the 21st century. “The Unbroken Circle” is an immersive film, featuring contemporary musicians discussing the lasting influence of the Bristol Sessions. As the patron exits, the wall displays ask them to reflect on country music in a larger context. These questions range from the broad “How does the music speak to you?” to the narrow “Who owns the songs of the Bristol Sessions?” On the opposite wall, the museum encourages the patron to “Join the Story” and leave a message on a large green colored whiteboard.

²⁷⁰ “Bristol Remastered: Another Take on Songs from The Sessions,” The Birthplace of Country Music Museum, Bristol, VA, October 14, 2014.

The patron exits the main museum space through doors that ask the reflective question “Will the circle remain?” and returns them to the historical contextualization exhibit atrium. Downstairs the museum has a community room, the Learning Center, a small one-hundred seat theater for concerts, educational programming, and community use, in addition to a gift shop, and special exhibit space. This space houses temporary exhibits that are produced in-house from the museum’s curatorial team or brought in from outside sources like the Smithsonian or other museums. The first exhibition in this space was “The Carter Family: Lives and Legacies. A Special Exhibit Curated by Family Members.” The museum curated this exhibit with assistance from the Carters. Other exhibits since the museum’s opening explored instrument making, folk traditions, Appalachian literature, and honky tonk images. It provides the museum further opportunities to engage the community and visitors with immersive programming about the history, art, and culture that centers on the legacies of the Bristol Sessions.

- Chapter Five -

Pick Up the Pieces: The Campaign to Rebuild, Revive, and Revitalize the Stax Records Building and Soulsville Neighborhood, 1989 - 2003.



Image Six: Stax Museum of American Soul, photo by author.



Image Seven: Mural in Soulsville neighborhood, photo by author.

I know we can make it
 This time we can go all the way
 Cause I realized now
 The cost of losing you
 Is too high a price
 Oh, for me to pay
 Carla Thomas, "Pick Up the Pieces," 1967.²⁷¹

Ben Cauley raised his trumpet to his lips to play like he did so many times before at the corner of College and East McLemore in South Memphis.²⁷² Only this time, Cauley, who grew up in the South Memphis neighborhood and attended LeMoyne-Owen College, wasn't inside the Stax Records building, the place where he recorded on dozens of hits with the Bar-Kays, Otis Redding, and Carla Thomas. Rather, he performed outside the building on the street. For this occasion he wasn't adding funky horn lines to a soul classic, but instead played one of his saddest songs, solo. Cauley knew sadness. On December 10, 1967, he survived a plane crash that killed Otis Redding, his bandmates in the Bar-Kays, and the pilot. He was the sole survivor. But on this December morning, Cauley played "Taps," a simple song that signifies the end; the end of the day or the end of a life. For on this day, a valiant effort to stop the South Side Church of God in Christ from tearing down the Stax Records building, a few inches from where Cauley now stood, came to an end. It also marked the end of the structure that once housed one of the

²⁷¹ Carla Thomas, "Pick Up the Pieces," by Don Davis, Kent Barker, and Fred Briggs, released on December 1, 1967, Stax S-239, 45 rpm.

²⁷² Bob Mehr, "A Look Back: Ben Cayley on the Plane Crash that Took the Life of Otis Redding and the members of the Bar-Kays," *USA Today*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/entertainment/music/2017/12/10/look-back-ben-cauley-plane-crash-took-life-otis-redding-and-members-bar-kays/938933001/>, accessed September 4, 2018.

largest and most successful independent labels in history, but it represented so much more.

Without consciously knowing it, Cauley's performance of "Taps" also signified the end of Memphis' neglect of its whole past and the beginning of a new day in the appreciation and preservation of its history. But it was too late for the Stax building as it originally stood, but not its history and its relevance to both the neighborhood of South Memphis and the world. The destruction of Stax made those interested in the commemoration of the Stax Records legacy come back stronger, more determined. They returned with a plan to celebrate and recontextualize the Stax story to benefit the children and citizens of the South Memphis neighborhood, so much so that the neighborhood rebranded itself "Soulsville."

In the summer of 1989, Ward Archer Jr., a copy of Peter Guralnick's book, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (1986). In the book, Guralnick dedicated eighty of its 353 pages to the history and importance of Stax Records. Though Archer grew up in Memphis, he remained unaware of Stax's South Memphis location, rather he believed it to be at its later location on Union Extended in Midtown Memphis. With that revelation, he put the book down and drove to the corner of College and East McLemore in late July. Upon his arrival, he became awash with mixed emotions; happy to still see the Stax building standing but aghast at its decrepit condition.

In 1974, due to a series of bad loans, charges of criminal embezzlement, and other unfortunate circumstances, the Union Planters Bank foreclosed on the Stax Record Company and all its property.²⁷³ This seizure included the building where Stax founders, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, set up shop in the former Capitol Theater in 1960. By 1980, the neighborhood became one of the poorest and most crime-ridden zip codes in the United States and the property held little to no resale value. To divest itself of this property and to acquire a sizable tax write-off, Union Planters “sold” the Stax building to the South Side Church of God in Christ for ten dollars. However, the property transfer held specific covenants set by the bank and agreed to by the South Side Church of God in Christ, which included the following two of note.

1. The said property is held in trust for the use and benefit of the members of the Church of God in Christ with National Headquarters in the City of Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, and subject to the Charter, Constitution, Laws and Doctrines of said Church, now in full force and effect, or as they may be hereafter amended, changed, or modified by the General Assembly of said Church.
2. The said property shall be solely used for non-profit religious, charitable, educational, scientific, cultural, and/or civic purposes. In the event that said property is used for any other purpose, then the property conveyed hereby and improvements thereon shall, solely at Grantor’s option, revert to Grantor. This covenant number 2 shall be a covenant running with the land and shall be binding on each successor Grantee.²⁷⁴

In other words, if the South Side Church of God in Christ used the building and land for anything other than “non-profit religious, charitable, educational, scientific, cultural, and/

²⁷³ For a full accounting of Stax’s demise, I recommend Robert Gordon’s *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 308-378 and Rob Bowman’s *Soulsville USA: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 272-386.

²⁷⁴ *Ward Archer Jr, Judy McEwen, et al v. Rev. Samuel Smith and the South Side Church of God in Christ*, 97551-1 (Chancery Court of Shelby County, Tennessee, 1989).

or civic purposes” the property reverted back to Union Planters Bank. Between 1980 and Archer’s visit in 1989, the Church of God in Christ did nothing to or for the building and while it still stood, it showed every sign of a decade plus of neglect: water damage, graffiti, vandalism, and infestation.

A few months prior to Archer’s visit, movie director Jim Jarmusch hired Sherman Wilmott to assist in the production of the film, *Mystery Train*. The script for the film included the story of two Japanese teenager’s spiritual pilgrimage to Memphis, the home of their hero, Elvis Presley. Wilmott, a native Memphian who recently returned back to his home city to open a record store and record label, Shangri-La Records, recommended Jarmusch shoot a scene using the abandoned Stax building as both background to the couple’s journey and for its symbolic imagery of a city struggling with its cultural past. The brief walk by the two tourists showed Stax in its blighted condition with “Stax Lives” symbolically spray painted on the front. It was Stax’s last appearance in any form of media.

With the Stax building still standing, but ignored, the local news reported in late July of 1989 that the Church of God in Christ commenced with the demolition to make way for a community center and soup kitchen. This news came as a shock to many, including Ward Archer Jr., Judy McEwan. The news reported, however, that Tucker’s Wrecking Company employees struck a gas line and its efforts had to stop. This brief reprieve jolted several Memphis citizens into action.

By the time the church began to raze the Stax building, Judy McEwen, the owner of a talent and management company, RU Productions, had reached out to Reverend Samuel Smith of the South Side Church of God in Christ. She wished to discuss leasing or purchasing the Stax building. McEwen envisioned reviving the magic of Stax for the current generation of Memphis musicians and songwriters. McEwen stated, “Elder Smith was receptive to our offer, but he was told by the church’s attorney that the building had been given to the church strictly for non-profit use. We were still hopeful of working something out, when suddenly....They started tearing the building down.” Ward Archer, Jr. recalled, “They [South Side Church of God in Christ] wanted to get rid of the liability of having that building or they, as some suggested, thought it should be torn down because it was the devil’s music...I don’t see any truth to that or not.”²⁷⁵

With the building’s destruction on hold until Memphis Light, Gas, and Water turned off the gas lines, McEwen and a group of like-minded citizens headed to the Memphis City Council. They hoped to implore the council to enter the fray and stop the South Side Church of God in Christ from tearing Stax down. Rufus Thomas, a Stax recording artist who recorded hits for the label over its entire time in business, observed, “The City [of Memphis] government and the people of Memphis need to stop being complacent about Stax. Graceland has been turned into a top tourist attraction, the same could be done for Stax. Stax was Memphis music.”²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Ward Archer Jr, interview by author, Memphis, April 3, 2017.

²⁷⁶ Calvin L. Burns, “Fight Continues to Save Stax; Studio Helped Out Memphis Music on Map,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 16, 1989, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/370644030?accountid=4886>.

On August 1, Judy McEwen, Tela McEwan, Charles E. McEwan, Austin G. Bradley, Ceola Spencer, and Mary Taylor attended the Memphis City Council meeting to convince the city government about the importance of Stax Records and the need for its intervention. These citizens argued that the abandoned building served the community better as a landmark to the musical and racial progress of the past rather than as an empty lot, community center, or in any other future incarnation. The council agreed with their argument, but there was little it could do to force the Church of God in Christ, a private landowner, to cease demolition. Interestingly, no one brought up the use of eminent domain, the power of a government to seize property in the public interest. One Councilperson remarked, "This Council has no authority to order a private landowner to do anything (inaudible) that is legal....The Council can, of course, request by resolution that the landowner take no action for a week."²⁷⁷ The council voted unanimously to send a letter recommending the Church allow for a brief period to study alternate plans for the Stax building. Additionally, the council procured \$2,000 of its budget for the erection of a chained link fence around the property to quell any further vandalism and souvenir hunters. The minutes of the meeting are as follows.

Introduction of items on matters by the general public: There was discussion by the Council and it was determined that South Side Baptist Church (sic) was the owner of the building. After further discussion with the legal staff, Council Member Vander Schaaf moved that the Council request a resolution supporting the preservation of the building formerly housed by the Stax Recording Company. Councilman Peete seconded the motion. Upon call of the question,

²⁷⁷ Memphis City Council Meeting, Shelby County Archives, Memphis, TN, August 1, 1989, cassette tape.

the vote being unanimous in the affirmative, the Chairman declared the motion carried and the request for a resolution approved.²⁷⁸

The group of citizens and the council agreed to revisit the issue at the next meeting in a week. However, when the Council reconvened a week later, it passed on further discussion or action as a group of citizens took the matter to the Chancery Court of Shelby County, Tennessee.

At the same time as McEwan's approach of Reverend Smith and the Memphis City Council, Ward Archer Jr., entered his car in the morning after the news report and with his newly installed cellphone, drove to the corner of College and East McLemore. He called everyone he could think of, including Jack Soden of Graceland, Linn Sitler of the Memphis and Shelby County Film and Television Commission, real estate developer Henry Turley, and attorney Karl Schledwitz, amongst others. All of the above quickly joined Archer in the belief that something needed to be done to save the Stax building. However, Archer also reached out to the officials at the various tourism bureaus and found little support. Archer remembers the tone of Memphis tourism at that time.

At the time I was in the advertising business and had a company called Archer-Malmo . . . I remember working on marketing materials for the city and they did not want to mention Graceland because he [Elvis Presley] died of a drug overdose and the music and BBQ thing is just a bunch of drunk people. So all the cultural tourism . . . everybody in those days the city that looked like and wanted to be like was Charlotte, North Carolina.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ward Archer Jr., interview by author, Memphis, April 3, 2017.

Sitler and Schledwitz soon joined Archer at the corner of College and McLemore. They determined that obtaining a “Stop Work Order” was the only course of action and headed over to the Chancery Court that afternoon.

Ward Archer, Jr., Linda Sitler, Mary Taylor, and Judy McEwen filed a “Complaint for Temporary Restraining Order, Temporary Injunction, and Permanent Injunction” on August 3, 1989. Archer was no stranger to Herculean efforts to save Memphis history. In 1986, he led the charge to save and preserve the *Memphis Belle*, the famous World War Two B17 Flying Fortress bomber, where it remained on display at Mud Island Pavilion for over twenty years. In the complaint, the four plaintiffs identified themselves as the South Memphis District Alliance of Neighborhood Associations and sought redress from Reverend Samuel Smith and the Southside Church of God in Christ. The group argued, “That the building which formerly housed Stax Records is considered by many to be a historical landmark” and “That the Federal Government has appropriated funds and begun steps in order to list the property on the National Historical Register.”²⁸⁰ The judge agreed with their argument and granted a temporary injunction to stop any further destruction of the Stax building, only a few hours after Archer began frantically calling people from his car parked on the corner of College and East McLemore.

On August 7, W. Otis Higgs, Jr of the Peete, Higgs, and Armstrong law firm on behalf of the South Side Church of God in Christ responded to the allegations enumerated by the South Memphis District Alliance of Neighborhood Associations (SMDANA). The

²⁸⁰ *Ward Archer Jr, Judy McEwen, et al v. Rev. Samuel Smith and the South Side Church of God in Christ*, 97551-1 (Chancery Court of Shelby County Tennessee 1989). Also, I located a copy of a National Register nomination in the Stax Museum archive, however, it was not dated and did not indicate who wrote it.

Church outlined its binding covenants from Union Planters and provided evidence of its progress towards building a community center containing a gymnasium, kitchen, shelter, and educational facilities. The court again agreed with the plaintiffs at the hearing on August 18 and placed an injunction stopping the church from further destruction of the structure.

With the reprieve, the group sought pathways to acquire and preserve the Stax legacy and building. However, the SMDANA found a populace and city not yet ready to embrace its heritage as the result of African American and musical contributions. Archer recalls, “It got a lot of publicity. But I think everybody kind of came to the conclusion that there wasn’t any viable way to make anything out of it. We didn’t get any support... And so at the same time we [Archer-Malmo] were involved with the city who was building the Pyramid.”²⁸¹ Real estate developer Henry Turley suggested reaching out to the group in charge of developing the Pyramid, John Tigrett and Sidney Shlenker.

Sidney Shlenker recently arrived in Memphis to much fanfare at the behest of John Tigrett to oversee and develop the fifty-five million dollar, 20,000 seat Pyramid Arena in downtown Memphis, as well as the floundering Mud Island. Shlenker owned the Denver Nuggets and founded the successful event promotion company, Pace Management. He envisioned a twenty-million dollar package of amenities and attractions, including a large interactive music museum celebrating American music history and Memphis’ large role in shaping it. Those additions to the arena, he believed, should lure

²⁸¹ Ward Archer Jr., interview by author, Memphis, April 3, 2017.

tourists to the city, the revived downtown area, and the Pyramid. The planned music museum filled the eight football fields of space at the base of the structure. Additionally, Shlenker agreed to reimburse the city for its construction and locate sponsors to fund the development of the museum and additional attractions. With the recent successful openings and renovations of Graceland, Sun Studios, and the Beale Street Entertainment District, Shlenker possessed the correct belief that music lay at the center of Memphis' evolution from a regional to an international tourist destination.

The City of Memphis' 1986 loss of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to Cleveland, Ohio fueled Shlenker and many in the city to right that incredible wrong. Memphis did more for the development of American music and rock and roll than Cleveland, but the city put forward very little effort and proposed a minuscule package of financial incentives to secure this major attraction. So, Archer came to the right man at the right time, as Shlenker had quickly ingratiated himself to the Memphis community, so much so that *Memphis Magazine* twice named him its "Man of the Year." Additionally, Shlenker needed artifacts for his planned music museum and one of its greatest contributors became available at the same time.

Separately, both Sidney Shlenker and Judy McEwen approached Reverend Samuel Smith regarding the purchase of the Stax building and property with different proposals for its future. W. Otis Higgs, the attorney for the church, declared that anyone could purchase the building for \$150,000 and by obtaining an agreement from Union Planters Bank to release the property from the covenants. However, neither Judy

McEwen nor Sidney Shlenker reached an agreement to acquire the building from COGIC. Whether either of them agreed to the price or approached the bank remains unknown. But in the end, Rev. Samuel Smith decided that the community center and soup kitchen on the site served the South Memphis community better than any of the proposed uses envisioned by either McEwen or Shlenker. Additionally, a few of Shlenker's executives advised against the purchase and renovation of the Stax building and any attempt to create a tourist attraction at the original site. To them, it did not seem feasible or practical in its current condition and in the South Memphis neighborhood. It was too far from Beale Street and lacked affiliated businesses, other draws, and hotels necessary to support a tourist attraction. Also the neighborhood's negative reputation muddied the waters towards preservation.²⁸² Its median household annual income hovered around \$12,652, fifty-percent of its populace lived below the poverty line, and single female households amounted to seventy-percent of the neighborhood population.²⁸³

In September 1989, the interested groups reached a compromise. Ward Archer, Jr., et al. promised to drop their lawsuit against the church. The South Side Church of God in Christ agreed to sell the demolition rights to the Pyramid in exchange for \$1,500. With the material from the Stax building, the Pyramid pledged to rebuild the facade and Studio A in its new music museum. Additionally, the Pyramid donated \$10,000 each to both the

²⁸² David Less, interview by author, via telephone, April 11, 2017.

²⁸³ Kate Miller, "Soulsville: A Catalyst for Revival in a Neighborhood with the Blues," *Memphis Business Journal*, June 3, 2002, Stax Museum Archive.

church and LeMoyne-Owen College, a historically black college located a few blocks from the Stax building. At a press conference held on the LeMoyne-Owen campus to announce the compromise and present the checks to both the college and church, Shlenker made the following statement.

I am not the savior of anything. I simply realized the importance of Stax and LeMoyne-Owen to the City of Memphis. We all don't have equal opportunities. Those who are blessed to have more, owe something... You owe it to yourself to try and make the community a better place to live. The kids who go to black colleges need help. Most of them come from families whose average income is between \$10,000 and \$12,000 a year. LeMoyne-Owen now has an opportunity to receive matching funds to help students receive the education they need in order to open the door of equal opportunity. Stax is certainly an intricate part in the growth of American music, as it evolved from gospel, to rock and roll, to soul, to all the stages of the blues. It just kind of fit together.²⁸⁴

Many were disappointed that the original Stax structure now faced the wrecking ball, but others possessed the satisfaction that at least its legacy, though relocated, would survive, somewhat intact, a few miles away. The idea to move a historic structure to the more tourist-friendly confines of Beale Street and the Memphis downtown area was nothing new in Memphis. A few years earlier, the City of Memphis relocated the W.C. Handy House, the "Founder of the Blues," from its South Memphis location on Jeanette Street to Beale. Karl Schledwitz, the attorney and a spokesperson for the Save Our Stax organization concluded, "With all the circumstances considered, we feel that the preservation of Stax in a museum-type environment is the best alternative. There Stax

²⁸⁴ Calvin L. Burns, "Shlenker Tells Why He Backed Stax's Legacy," *Tri-State Defender*, September 20, 1989, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/370688378?accountid=4886>.

will not only be preserved, but also, just importantly, showcased in a place where millions will come and learn about the contribution of Stax to the world of music.”²⁸⁵

With the demolition rights secured, Shlenker sent Jimmy Ogle, the general manager of Mud Island, and several other Island Management Authority and Pyramid Management Authority employees to collect any remaining artifacts and dismantle the facade of the building in December. While removing the bricks from the front of the building, the employees discovered the original tile mosaic Stax Records sign between the two entryway doors. Immediately, but carefully, they sawed it out with its support structure behind the sign. Jimmy Ogle recalls this effort.

We cut out that tile facade, studs and all. It weighed about 500 pounds. If you took it apart, it would just crumble like a tile floor, I think it is about 3,600 pieces . . . we cut the studs and everything behind it and put it in one of the music galleries in the Mississippi River Museum [on Mud Island] . . . it is a great artifact...it was Tommy Powell, David Less, me, Chip Reid, Mr Ed [Williamson], KC Jones, Susan Elliott...we were the ones involved in all that, who found it and got it saved.²⁸⁶

The employees transported the artifacts, bricks, and mosaic Stax sign to Mud Island for safekeeping while Shlenker secured the funding for the museum.

However, several internal and external factors caused the realization of the music museum and the rebuilding of Stax inside the Pyramid to never materialize. This confluence of events caused the artifacts to remain at Mud Island for over a decade and transformed Sidney Shlenker from savior into one of the most despised characters in the

²⁸⁵ Terry Keeter, “Stax Gains Place in Pyramid, LeMoyne-Owen Scholarships,” *Commercial Appeal*, date unknown, from Ward Archer Jr’s collection.

²⁸⁶ Jimmy Ogle, interview by author, Memphis, March 10, 2017.

history of Memphis. Today, many Memphis citizens refer to Shlenker as a “scammer,” “a flimflam artist,” and other colorful descriptions reflecting their extreme disappointment. To them, he oversold promises and returned nothing but underwhelming results and debt to build the music museum and turn the Pyramid into a source of civic pride.

As a part of the contract with the City of Memphis to develop and operate the Pyramid, Shlenker agreed that while the city maintained ownership, he would secure funding to both reimburse its initial investment and develop various attractions both within and outside of the structure. However, due to this arrangement many investors and sponsors possessed reservations about committing funds to the Pyramid. Additionally, the United States economy entered into a recession in 1990 due to a restrictive monetary policy set by the President George H. W. Bush administration to curb inflation. On top of that, the growing instability in the Middle East, the largest supplier of oil to the United States, and a pending military conflict with Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait, the banks and corporate sponsors became more reluctant to part with its cash. Additional charges of financial mismanagement, a disastrous opening that included a flood on the first floor,²⁸⁷ serious cost overruns, and an internal struggle for control between Tigrett and Shlenker became a recipe for the Pyramid’s failure. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Pyramid devolved into a public relations catastrophe that saw no progress in the development of a music museum at its base. At one point, Shlenker secured significant financing from Société Générale, a French bank, for the music

²⁸⁷ New venues now conduct what they call a “Pyramid Test” prior to opening to the public, wherein the venue will flush all the toilets simultaneously to insure the sewer system can handle the sudden influx of water and waste and not back up.

museum and other amenities. However, the bank withdrew its offer after receiving an anonymous letter from a Memphis citizen calling into question Shlenker's ability to secure the remaining funds and the growing distrust between him and the City of Memphis.²⁸⁸ With that and several other internal dysfunctions, the people of Memphis and the Pyramid ran Shlenker out of town, somewhat justifiably vilified him, and became liable for the costs and shortcomings of the grandiose project now lacking any drawing power or commemoration of Stax. Sherman Wilmott recalls, "That is the way Memphis was in 1989. There was just no movement for historic preservation or appreciation of culture or any acknowledgement of how amazing Stax was. Not just for the world, but for us and as an actual employer and business when it was going. It was one of the largest employers in the city as a small business, let alone in the African American community."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Tom Jones, "If Sidney Shlenker Hadn't Existed, We Might Have Had to Invent Him," *Smart City Memphis*, July 19, 2007, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://smartcitymemphis.blogspot.com/2007/07/if-sidney-shlenker-hadnt-existed-we.html>.

²⁸⁹ Sherman Wilmott, interview by author, Memphis, March 11, 2017.

Love Is Here Today and Gone Tomorrow: Reestablishing the Stax Legacy in Memphis

Oh, listen to me
 Love is here today
 But, it could be gone, gone tomorrow
 Love, Love is here today
 But it could be gone, gone tomorrow
 Hey, guys, listen to me
 Get your business straight
 Better stop wasting so much time
 'Cause a good girl just won't wait.
 The Mad Lads, "Love Is Here Today and Gone Tomorrow," 1969.²⁹⁰

Within a few months of the Stax building's destruction, the City of Memphis erected a historical marker at the now empty lot on June 21, 1991. The sign initially identified "The Stable Singers" instead of the Staple Singers as a former Stax artist and the location remained forgotten and ignored. Additionally, the South Side Church of God in Christ never progressed with its plans to build the community center despite the evidence provided in the injunction. In its deposition, the church showed that it had secured the funds and engaged a construction company to construct the community center. Why it never enacted those plans remains unknown and the lot remained empty. After the valiant attempt by Memphis citizens in 1989, efforts to preserve and tell the Stax story focused on the more commercially viable and tourist-friendly downtown area, similar to the recently abandoned Pyramid plans.

²⁹⁰ The Mad Lads, "Love Is Here Today and Gone Tomorrow," by Allen Jones and Bettye Crutcher, released in January 1969, Volt VOA-4009, 45 rpm.

The leveling of the Stax building and the loss of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum to Cleveland served as the genesis for Memphis finally embracing its rich and total historic past. Part of this turn in Memphis' commitment to preserve historic sites throughout the city occurred in mid-1990s under the leadership of Mayor Willie W. Herenton. The City of Memphis elected Herenton, a LeMoyne-Owen College graduate, in 1991. He was the city's first elected African American mayor. Wanda Rushing in *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* observes, "City leaders and developers, who in earlier times might have distanced themselves from local culture, especially African American cultural contributions, now boast about the global significance of the culture and the *place* associated with it."²⁹¹ Miriam Decosta-Willis in *Notable Black Memphians* adds, "As Mayor, he [Willie W. Herenton] focused on economic, educational, and cultural development of the city through the infusion of private investments."²⁹² This change lies not only in the pace and priority of preserving Memphis' rich past, but in respect for its African American history and culture.

On July 13, 1997, the *Commercial Appeal* published the article "Preserving What's Left, Struggle Continues to Save Defining Places in City's Past," chronicling this new era of historic and cultural preservation. Journalist Michael Lollar interviewed Ward Archer, Jr. and archeologist Guy Weaver regarding the changing climate in Memphis's commitment to historic preservation. Weaver observed that historic preservation's

²⁹¹ Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 122.

²⁹² Miriam Decosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008), 170.

greatest threat in the past was the City of Memphis but “This administration [Memphis Mayor W. W. Herenton’s] has done more for preservation than the last four or five administrations.” Ward Archer, Jr. added that under the Herenton administration the climate for preservation positively changed and believed the bulldozers that leveled Stax “would be stopped for sure.”²⁹³

New organizations proposed various Stax commemorations in the 1990s, focusing on the newly rejuvenated Beale Street and Downtown Memphis for its locations. None even considered the now empty lot that was once housed Stax in South Memphis. The Pyramid once again entered the fray in 1995 with a proposal from Bert Ellis, owner of WMC-TV. His idea included a Stax exhibit as part of a branded museum with Dick Clark’s *American Music Awards*.²⁹⁴ However, nothing ever happened with his idea.

In 1996, reports surfaced of the Smithsonian Institution’s interest in constructing a downtown Memphis “Rock ’n’ Soul: Social Crossroads” museum dedicated to the entirety of Memphis music history with the Stax story as a featured part.²⁹⁵ The Smithsonian’s Memphis Rock and Soul Museum, which included a respectable Stax Records exhibition, opened in the Gibson Building in 2000. It eventually moved next to the Fed Ex Forum a few blocks from Beale Street in 2004. At the same time of the

²⁹³ Michael Lollar, “Preserving What’s Left Struggle Continues to Save Defining Places in City’s Past,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), July 13, 1997, accessed January 30, 2017, Infotrac Newsstand.

²⁹⁴ Jody Callahan, “Music Museum May Focus on Stax Sounds: Beale Site Latest Plan Showcase,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), May 4, 1995, from Deanie Parker’s private collection.

²⁹⁵ Jody Callahan, “Local Museums Tune to Smithsonian’s Plans,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), May 2, 1996, accessed January 30, 2017, Infotrac Newsstand.

Smithsonian's exploration of a music museum in Memphis, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences began to explore the feasibility of opening a Grammy Museum, also in the downtown area. Again, the outside organizations acknowledged the importance of creating a Stax exhibit, but never considered the possibility of the original site in its plans. During these inquiries, two people who played significant roles in the history of Stax stepped up with concepts to commemorate their former employer. Deanie Parker and Steve Cropper developed separate proposals for a Stax Records focused memorialization in the mid 1990s. However, both proposals placed its buildings squarely on or near Beale Street.

Steve Cropper, the former Stax session musician, producer, songwriter, and member of Booker T and the MGs, headed a group that planned a Stax themed restaurant and nightclub on Beale Street. The Stax branded club and restaurant concept included a Stax exhibit with artifacts and interpretive signage. Rumors persisted that the restaurant and nightclub was to open through the late 1990s but never did. Around the same time investors approached Deanie Parker, a former Stax recording artist and the head of publicity from the 1960s through its closing, about joining an effort to construct a Stax themed club on Beale. Parker recalled, "What we created there [Stax Records] and the impact we have had on Rhythm and Blues globally to a club on Beale Street is blasphemous. I'm not going out like that."²⁹⁶ She shared her ideas for a more

²⁹⁶ Deanie Parker, interview by author, Southaven, MS, April 3, 2017.

appropriate recognition of Stax's history. This vision led to the formation of the Cisum Crew, Inc., with developer Lyman Aldrich and former Stax Vice President Larry Shaw.

Cisum developed a fifteen million dollar proposal for a Stax dedicated museum and music club. The Cisum plan also targeted Beale Street as museum's location. The group outlined the raising of eighty percent of the funds from government loans, grants, and gifts of land from the city with the remaining support coming from private sources. While city and county officials enthusiastically supported Cisum's plan, Tom Jones, an aide to Shelby County Mayor Jim Rout, expressed concern.

The one thing that I do worry about with all the Memphis music projects, is that...we think the rest of the country has the same awareness as we do. I don't know what the name recognition of Stax is. Although I don't think there's any denial that that was the bright spot in Memphis history.²⁹⁷

In addition to traditional artifact presentation and interpretive panels, Cisum outlined several interactive exhibits, including a recording booth and mixing board. Also the proposal presented an idea for a nightclub that planned to broadcast an amateur night similar to the Apollo Theater in New York City and the talent shows hosted by Rufus Thomas on Beale Street in the 1940s and 50s.²⁹⁸ While Cisum advanced its plans forward, though slowly, Parker and Cisum secured an agreement with Fantasy Records²⁹⁹ in January 1996 to license the Stax name and logos in its proposed museum and

²⁹⁷ Ibid..

²⁹⁸ Jody Callahan, "Music Museum May Focus on Stax Sounds: Beale Site Latest Plan Showcase."

²⁹⁹ Fantasy, now Concord, obtained the intellectual property rights to Stax's trademarks and sound recording copyrights post 1968 in the 1970s asset auction.

establishment.³⁰⁰ Parker dates her relationship with Fantasy Records to 1978 when former Stax producer and songwriter David Porter attempted to revitalize the Stax Record label. While Parker was willing to cede credit to others, like the mayor's office, and for the location to be on or near Beale Street, Cisum received little financial support from the city or outside benefactors. So in 1998, Parker decided to let go of Cisum.

With all of the interest in developing musical tourism beyond Graceland, Sun Studios, and few downtown music museums, none considered locating its effort on the abandoned lot that once housed the Stax record label and studio in South Memphis. However, though the Stax site remained empty, a movement to revitalize and clean up the neighborhood came from LeMoyne-Owen College and the newly elected mayor, Willie Herenton.

LeMoyne-Owen College President Irving McPhail envisioned the college as the center of community engagement and development. In 1988, he founded the LeMoyne-Owen College Community Development Corporation (LOCCDC) with the following charge

To raise the economic and education levels of those that live and work in the LeMoyne-Owen College Community to foster and sustain a community process that will 1) eliminate racial tension, prejudice and discrimination; 2) lessen sickness, poverty, and crime; and 3) expand education, recreation, housing, and economic opportunities in the LeMoyne-Owen College Community.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ "Stax Trademark License Agreement," January 1, 1996, Deanie Parker's personal archive.

³⁰¹ LeMoyne-Owen Community Development Corporation, <https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/org91538.jsp>, accessed July 26, 2021.

In the beginning, though, the LOCCDC accomplished little more than some peripheral community engagement and raised \$100,000 from the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1989.

Around the same time as LeMoyne-Owen's launch of its community development project, the federal government through the Department of Housing and Urban Development Department launched the Hope VI initiative.

The HOPE VI Program was developed as a result of recommendations by the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, which was charged with proposing a National Action Plan to eradicate severely distressed public housing. The Commission recommended revitalization in three general areas: physical improvements, management improvements, and social and community services to address resident needs.³⁰²

Mayor Willie Herenton and the LOCCDC immediately seized upon this new program. Next to Atlanta, Memphis used the Hope VI program more than any other municipality to revitalize its blighted public housing and to replace them with modern mixed income facilities. The 842-unit LeMoyne Gardens apartment complex located across the street from the college and a few blocks from where Stax once stood was its first Hope VI project. By this time, LeMoyne Gardens became notorious as the most impoverished, blighted, crime ridden, and gang infested locations within the City of Memphis.³⁰³ The City of Memphis soon replaced LeMoyne Gardens with College Park, a mixed income public housing complex.

³⁰² "About Hope VI," US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed April 1, 2017, https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/hope6

³⁰³ Audrey Williams June, "A South Memphis Renaissance," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 50, no 20 (January 30, 2004): A23-24. *Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, accessed April 16, 2017, EBSCOhost.

Though Hope VI offered residents the first right to rent the new apartments, many did not return. Jeffrey Higgs, the current Executive Director and President of the LOCCDC, asserts that the new complex made the neighborhood look nicer and lowered crime but it did not address the needs of the community, much of which lies in the infrastructure and traditional business that benefit both the populace and possibly tourism.

That a lot of folks who came out of those Hope VI's didn't really get a chance to go back. Because think about it now, you're having to lock your door every night, somebody may have broken into your house, you get a chance to leave and maybe you move into another neighborhood far from here and suddenly the crime is not as bad, there is a grocery store in the neighborhood, there is maybe a better school, hmm do I really want to go back?

Yes, there's new buildings, but it is in the same place. So I think there's two failures with Hope VI, and I've done some work with HUD nationally, is a lot of those people didn't get a chance to come back, and they didn't think about the commercial development part of housing. Because you know, we still don't have a grocery store, despite us building a building, we still don't have a grocery store, there's no hardware stores, we don't want one but there's no liquor stores in our neighborhood.

To have viable neighborhoods you gotta have amenities. We are planning a big housing development with over 200 units of housing, and the question came up 'well what do you get first? Does the retail come first?' Because the retailers aren't coming if there's no rooftops, but we are thinking simultaneously, as we think about the housing, ok, we know we got to have a grocery store, we know we got to have some restaurants, there are just certain basic things that neighborhoods have.³⁰⁴

LeMoyne-Owen College understood that to fully redevelop and engage the South Memphis neighborhood, it needed to focus on economic development. In 1999,

³⁰⁴ Jeffrey Higgs, interview by author, Memphis, April 4, 2017.

LeMoyne-Owen College hired Jeffrey Higgs to head the LOCCDC as an affiliated but separate entity from the college. As its first full-time leader, Higgs set out to enlist the community and encourage partners to redevelop the South Memphis neighborhood. In addition to attracting businesses to the area, historic and cultural preservation developed into one of his priorities.

In addition to the new commitment to revitalize struggling neighborhoods and to preserve Memphis' past, several other events in the 1990s helped to spur interest to revive the Stax site. First, Fantasy Records released a nine CD box set entitled *The Complete Stax/Volt Soul Singles: 1972-1975*. Rhino Records released the first box set containing Stax singles from 1959-1968, as Atlantic Records owned those masters. Fantasy Records purchased Stax masters and trademarks at an auction caused by the bankruptcy proceedings in the mid-1970s and released the second box containing tracks from 1968 - 1971. The third box set won a Grammy Award for best album notes in 1996.³⁰⁵ Second, Robert Bowman, a professor of Ethnomusicology and Musicology at York University in Toronto, authored a critically acclaimed biography of the company entitled *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (1997). Schirmer released the book in 1997. Third, Deanie Parker and Fantasy Records organized a Grammy celebration at B. B. King's Blues Club on Beale Street featuring many former Stax artists. At that show, Sherman Wilmott introduced himself and his friend and former schoolmate, G. Staley Cates, to

³⁰⁵ "The Winners of the 1996 Grammy Awards," *New York Times*, March 1, 1996, accessed February 12, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/01/arts/the-winners-of-the-1996-grammy-awards.html>.

Deanie Parker.³⁰⁶ Cates and Wilmott were beginning to formulate their own ideas for a Stax commemoration. With this groundswell of interest in Stax from both inside and outside the city limits at a time when Memphis possessed a better environment for cultural and historic preservation a second effort to memorialize the company at its original site began to develop in earnest.

Can't Ever Let You Go: Stax Returns to Soulsville

I'll never let you go.
 When I wake up in the morning
 You are always, always on my mind.
 Don't break up, please let's make up
 Somehow I can't keep from cryin'.
 Rufus Thomas, "Can't Ever Let You Go," 1962.³⁰⁷

In January of 1998, Staley Cates invited four people to join him at the empty lot where Stax once stood to gather their feedback and interest in an idea he wanted to pursue. Staley Cates, a native Memphian, is president of Southeastern Asset Management. In 1995, he cofounded the Poplar Foundation, one of Memphis' largest nonprofits and an organization dedicated to raising funds and supporting education and community development initiatives.³⁰⁸ As both a longtime fan of Stax Records and being very civic minded, he believed that not only could they rebuild Stax on its original site as

³⁰⁶ Andy Cates, interview by author, Memphis, April 4, 2017.

³⁰⁷ Rufus Thomas, "Can't Ever Let You Go," by Rufus Thomas, released in July, 1962, Stax 45-126, 45 rpm.

³⁰⁸ John Branston, "A Guide to Memphis' Largest Nonprofits," *Memphis: The City Magazine*, July 1, 2015, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://memphismagazine.com/features/columns/your-guide-to-the-biggest-nonprofits-in-memphis/>

a museum, but could help revitalize and serve the surrounding community much like it did during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.

The four people Cates invited to the empty lot that day included Andy Cates, Sherman Wilmott, Tim Sampson, and Henry Turley. Andy Cates, Staley's brother, was a founding partner in Viceroy Investments, LLC in Dallas, Texas. He possessed real estate experience and Staley envisioned his brother as the project leader.³⁰⁹ Wilmott attended high school with Staley Cates and he owned Shangri-La Records, a successful and highly respected independent record store and record label in Memphis. Wilmott possessed a deep understanding of the history of Memphis music, especially that of Stax Records. Tim Sampson recently departed *Memphis Magazine* to work at an advertising and public relations firm and had just started the *Memphis Flyer*, a weekly city arts and entertainment newspaper. Finally, Henry Turley was a businessman and real estate developer whose recent projects included several reclamation projects, including the Shrine Building, 88 Union Center, the Businessmen's Club, and the Cotton Exchange Building. Turley was also a part of the 1989 effort to save the Stax building and to relocate it inside of the Pyramid downtown.³¹⁰ Tim Sampson recalls the setting of the meeting.

I have photographs from that day of us standing out there on the awful looking, horrible site. Just covered in . . . it was creepy. Because it was so cold and barren and there was garbage everywhere and just like broken glass, broken concrete, and there was an old refrigerator with the door missing off of it. There was, this

³⁰⁹ Andy Cates is currently the Founder and CEO of RVC Outdoor Destinations in Memphis. "Andy Cates," <https://rvcoutdoors.com/andy-cates-memphis/>, accessed July 21, 2021.

³¹⁰ "Downtown Core," Henry Turley Company website, <https://www.henryturley.com/work/downtown-core/>, accessed April 27, 2022.

was a bombed out apartment building with no windows and there was a burned up school bus out back and there was crack houses and . . . You got the feeling of I don't want to be out here at night. Which was pretty valid. I found out that later, though as I started coming out here at night all the time.³¹¹

The five attendees agreed at different levels of enthusiasm that this effort possessed the merit to not only revive the Stax story, but also to both aid in a revival of the South Memphis neighborhood and to make Stax's history relevant to its current residents.

The newly formed group, Ewarton Inc, a play on the Stax founders' last name, quickly secured five-million dollars of unrestricted donations from two anonymous private benefactors. Soon after, Deanie Parker, Charles Ewing, and George Johnson of LeMoyne-Owen College joined the Ewarton board and the effort to rebuild Stax and revitalize the South Memphis neighborhood. This confluence of passionate and determined individuals undertook an effort that failed several times before, but this time it focused on the less travelled and transitional neighborhood of Stax's original home, South Memphis. Sherman Wilmott remembers that, "We immediately started working on building a museum. We didn't know what we were doing."³¹² In addition to productive trips and meetings with the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, the Ewarton board visited two other preservation projects that possessed similar goals and outcomes that it hoped to replicate.

³¹¹ Tim Sampson interview with author.

³¹² Sherman Wilmott interview with author.

These two projects proved a catalyst for community redevelopment of especially impoverished and crime ridden neighborhoods.³¹³ The first was Tom Cousin's preservation of the historic East Lake Golf Course in Atlanta, Georgia. Cousins used the East Lake Golf Course where Bobby Jones once played to help revive a neighborhood that suffered from high crime and low income. The neighborhood became known as "Little Vietnam." The second was the Bidwell Training Center and Manchester Craftsman Guild in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In 1968, Pittsburgh was a city racially divided and economically distressed. [Bill] Strickland established Manchester Craftsmen's Guild to help combat the economic and social devastation experienced by the residents of his predominantly African-American North Side neighborhood.³¹⁴

The Guild offers art, music, and education programs to local high school students. Andy Cates also acknowledged the 18th and Vine Historic District in Kansas City, Missouri as an example for the concept developed by Ewarton to not only rebuild Stax as a museum, but also a music academy to serve the children of the neighborhood. The government labelled many of the neighborhood children as "at-risk" since many qualified for the free school lunch program. Together, these projects illustrated the feasibility of efforts to both positively effect a neighborhood and to serve as a contemporary platform in the education of the neighborhood children through history and the arts without gentrifying the area or pricing the current residents out of the market.

³¹³ Andy Cates, interview by author, Memphis, April 4, 2017

³¹⁴ "Manchester Craftsman Guild, Westminster College Partner to Add College Courses to World-Class Youth Art Center," Westminster College website, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.westminster.edu/about/news/release.cfm?id=9662>

With an agreement reached about the proposition for rebuilding Stax and a music academy for the neighborhood children, the assembled group set out to transform its concept into a reality. Ewarton decided to act as quickly as possible and focused on five major areas to make the project a success. They codified the first three in the document, “Soulsville, USA Revitalization and Concept Plan.”³¹⁵ First priority was the acquisition and control of the real estate on the East McLemore block between College and Neptune. Next came fundraising and advocacy on behalf of the Stax Museum and Music Academy. The third focus was in the acquisition of a license to use the trademarked Stax name and logos from the then owner of Stax’s intellectual property, Fantasy Records.³¹⁶ In addition to the above, the Ewarton group agreed it must succeed in two additional areas. The museum needed memorabilia and an interpretive plan. To make the museum truly “authentic,” they wanted to reconstruct the Stax building, and most importantly, Studio A, to the exact dimensions and look as the original building. And finally, to gain the buy-in and support of both former Stax artists and employees, but also of the citizens of the South Memphis neighborhood.

The Ewarton group immediately set out to acquire the many parcels on the block that amounted to approximately six acres of land, the two most important were the original Stax property still held by the South Side Church of God in Christ and a large lot containing dozens of blighted and semi-abandoned apartments. Andy Cates recalled, “So

³¹⁵ “Soulsville, USA Revitalization Development and Concept Plan,” circa 2000, Stax Museum Archive, Memphis, TN.

³¹⁶ Andy Cates, interview by author, Memphis, April 4, 2017.

you have this disaster area, but what is going on here, and you are two and a half miles from downtown, is if you can tackle that block, the biggest cancer in the neighborhood, sadly and ironically, is the original Stax site and its contiguous parcels.”³¹⁷ Cates and the Ewarton board located and spoke to the owners of the various lots. Andy Cates quickly determined that both the city and the use of eminent domain were not going to be effective ways to acquire the land. “Number one, I don’t think they will do it. Number two, it will be a good way to be toxic out of the gate with the neighborhood...there was no threats and no arm twisting.”³¹⁸ Ewarton acquired parcel after parcel, sometimes in an interesting fashion with speed and honesty as its two drivers. Some of the parcels, once it located the owner, Ewarton purchased for cash with the deal closed in a parking lot. Ewarton acquired the adjacent large lot with the dozens of blighted and abandoned apartment buildings. Shelby County made an in-kind donation and razed the buildings free of charge. Once Ewarton acquired and cleared that lot, it could envision the success of the project. “Once we did the apartments, I knew we could build a museum, because even if we build it next door to the site that was legitimate enough. Because people wouldn’t go ‘Oh, you are not even on the original site,’ because it was next door,” recalls Sherman Wilmott. Even though the lot was next door to the original Stax site, its location proved close enough to carry both impact and a level of authenticity.

However, Ewarton wanted the original lot, so the organization began to reach out to both the South Side Church of God in Christ. Even with the intervention of David

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Porter, whose father served as a bishop in the church, it was unable to close on the property. Sherman Wilmott remembers, “It was a really weird and tense meeting and this preacher from down the street. I don’t know what his issue was. But he started saying things about drugs and how Stax brought drugs into the neighborhood and made the neighborhood bad. So we left discouraged, but at least he was talking to us.”³¹⁹

The Ewarton group knew a meeting with COGIC leader, Bishop G. E. Patterson, who also possessed a stake in the Stax property, was necessary. Andy Cates recalled the interaction between Ewarton and the Church of God in Christ.

COGIC is a complicated world and it is wildly political, so I’m going to be clear, I don’t know, I speculate. That is why I met with Bishop Patterson, which literally for them was like meeting the pope . . . Deanie Parker got me a meeting with the Bishop . . .

He was the head of the whole church, at the mother church and I think he was helpful . . . I felt like I was going to the Vatican. I walk down the corridor, there’s nobody in the room, massive room. And there was tons of back conversations . . . He called the Reverend [Smith]. I don’t know what he said, but things did move a little quicker after that . . .

But most importantly, the biggest message we had to them was time. It has been ten years [since COGIC tore down the building]. Without offending them, what do you want to do, just put some money in your pocket [for the church], it was donated to you so just call it a day.³²⁰

After Bishop Patterson’s intervention, the various meetings with COGIC, and other entreaties between Ewarton and COGIC, the South Side Church of God in Christ sold the abandoned Stax lot to Ewarton for \$100,000. With that, Ewarton completed its control of the real estate on the Stax block and now possessed the original Stax property. The

³¹⁹ Sherman Wilmott, interview by author, Memphis, March 11, 2017.

³²⁰ Andy Cates, interview by author, Memphis, April 4, 2017.

negotiated amount was \$50,000 less than Otis Higgs, Jr., the attorney for the South Side Church of God in Christ, proposed in 1989.

While Ewarton initially raised five-million dollars in unsecured donations from two anonymous benefactors, it set a fundraising goal of twenty-million dollars. With this budget, Ewarton could properly build the Stax Museum and the Stax Music Academy, as well as possess enough cash for operations, staffing, and memorabilia acquisition. The City of Memphis and Shelby County Governments committed two-and-half million dollars each to the Stax project. Both Mayors, Willie Herenton of Memphis and Jim Rout of Shelby County, understood the importance of the project. Mayor Herenton was from the neighborhood and attended LeMoyne-Owen College. Mayor Rout, who went to high school with Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, realized the value of the museum and music academy to both the South Memphis neighborhood and the City of Memphis.

With ten-million dollars in funds from the anonymous donors, the city, and the county, Ewarton applied for and won a three-million dollar challenge grant from the Plough Foundation. While this was Plough's largest grant, it stipulated that Ewarton receive at least 2.5 million dollars each from the City of Memphis, Shelby County, and the State of Tennessee. While the city and county committed to the \$2.5 million required by the Plough Foundation's challenge grant, the State of Tennessee demurred. The State of Tennessee in the late 1990s found itself in dire financial straights, so much so that Governor Don Sundquist floated the very unpopular idea of a state income tax. The

Plough grant remained conditional on all three government agencies providing matching funds or it will not award any of its three-million dollars to Ewarton.

Ewarton made overtures to Tennessee Senators Fred Thompson and Bill Frist, in addition to its local Congressman, Harold Ford, Jr. While Senator Thompson showed no interest, Senator Frist proved a powerful and enthusiastic ally. The multifaceted partnerships coalescing to revitalize the South Memphis neighborhood most impressed him. Frist visited the Ewarton board and Stax site three times and secured another 2.5 dollars in federal funds. In a letter to Senator Christopher Bond, Chairman of the Subcommittee on VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies, Frist argued that the appropriation will, “Further encourage economic and tourism development in Memphis. More importantly, it will revitalize the surrounding neighborhood, enhance inner city education, and preserve and further the unique musical heritage and history of Memphis.”³²¹ With the grant of federal money, Ewarton requested that Plough consider its success with the federal government as a replacement to the requirement that the funds come from the state government. Thankfully, Diane Rudner, the head of the Plough Foundation, adjusted the requirements to reflect Ewarton’s accomplishment with the federal government and its meeting the goal with the city and county pledges as a replacement to its failure with the State of Tennessee. With Plough’s three-million dollars secured, Ewarton raised an additional three-million dollars, from several \$500,000 donations from the Hyde Foundation and other benefactors.

³²¹ Senator Bill Frist and Senator Fred Thompson Letter to Senator Christopher S. Bond, March 10, 2000, Stax Museum Archive, Memphis, TN.

Within two years, Ewarton raised over eighteen-million dollars and soon reached its twenty-million dollar goal. It held a series of “Soul-A-Thon” fundraisers throughout Memphis that provided some additional funding but helped more in the way of raising awareness and the feeling in ownership in the endeavor. Ewarton held many of these events at its temporary offices located in a small house recently acquired near the original Stax site. With the land and financing in place, Ewarton needed to address one of its biggest priorities, the right to use the name “Stax” and its logos for the museum and music academy, in addition to the eventual sales of merchandise.

When the Stax Record Company filed for bankruptcy and the Union Planters Bank seized its assets in 1976, one of its assets was the intellectual property, including the copyrights to the music publishing and sound recordings after Stax’s painful divorce from Atlantic in 1967 as well as the trademark to the name “Stax,” its affiliate labels, and all the logos. The bankruptcy courts required Stax’s intellectual property sold at auction and Saul Zaents’ Fantasy Records in California eventually acquired them. With the trademark, Fantasy Records owned the perpetual and exclusive right to the name.³²² Fantasy possessed the legal right to prevent others from using the Stax name and logos, including a not-for-profit museum housed on the original site of the company. Thankfully, Deanie Parker developed a relationship with Bill Belmont and Fantasy Records, evidenced in her prior relationship at Cisum and the organization of the Grammy celebration at B. B. King’s club a few years earlier.

³²² Concord Music Group acquired Fantasy Records in 2004.

So, she [Deanie Parker] was integral to that relationship because without the legal rights to the marks and the relationship that has developed between now Concord and the museum. You got a music museum that you cannot even name. You can't do anything, it would be the Memphis Museum of Soul. She was an extremely important part of the project for those reasons. Very knowledgeable with her contacts in that world.³²³

Eventually, Deanie Parker, Andy Cates, and the Ewarton board after hours of negotiation and a site visit by Bill Belmont worked out a perpetual license to use the name Stax for the museum and music academy and favorable rights and royalty terms to include the name, image, and logos on its merchandise.

While securing the land, financing, and Stax license, the Ewarton board put an equal effort into acquiring memorabilia from Stax artists and outside collectors. After all, how successful could a museum be without significant artifacts to fill it? Ewarton needed artifacts and photographs to illustrate the entire narrative of the company, artists, music, and culture. Once the project showed signs of success, most of Stax's former recording artists and employees quickly offered items from their personal collections. Booker T. Jones donated one of his organs and Fed Ex arranged and paid for its transportation to Memphis from Jones' home in California. Zelma Atwood also provided materials from her late husband, Otis Redding. Rufus Thomas allowed the Ewarton folks to raid his closet full of the colorful and outlandish costumes which evidenced his title of "the Funkiest Man Alive." Phalon Jones' mother donated his saxophone. Jones played it as a member of the Bar-Kays and rescue workers recovered it from the plane crash that claimed his, almost all of his bandmates', and Otis Redding's lives in 1967.

³²³ Sherman Wilmott, interview by author, Memphis, TN, March 11, 2017.

However, Ewarton lost an opportunity to acquire many significant artifacts when the Memphis Music Hall of Fame and Museum closed in 2000. The museum listed its holdings with Sotheby's Auction House. While Ewarton purchased a few items from the Memphis Music Hall of Fame, the auction included many that it didn't acquire including Al Jackson's studio drum set, which ended up at the Musicians Hall of Fame in Nashville, costumes worn by Rufus Thomas and Isaac Hayes, Booker Jones' keyboard, and a signed Albert King Flying V guitar.³²⁴ Steve Routhier, who helped shape the memorabilia collections of the Hard Rock Cafe and House of Blues, proved a fruitful source of memorabilia. "Steve went and negotiated to buy what became the foundation of our instrument collection [including most of Studio A]."³²⁵

Ewarton reached out through various publicity efforts to the community and collectors to advertise it was still in pursuit of artifacts for the museum. On WRBO, Sherman Wilmott announced Ewarton's need for more artifacts in 2001. A few days later, Ewarton received a call from a man who claimed to possess Hayes' Cadillac Eldorado. This contact was not the first time such a claim was made to the Ewarton organization, but they still decided to check it out. Hayes acquired the car in 1972 from Stax as part of a new recording contract on the heels of his successful *Shaft* soundtrack and the album, *Black Moses*. Hayes and Stax customized the peacock blue car with a television set, refrigerated bar, twenty-four carat gold exterior parts, fur carpeting, and custom

³²⁴ Bill Ellis, "Is Nothing Sacred? Not Music Museum, Sotheby's Gets Its Mitts on Memphis Memorabilia," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), September 16, 2000, accessed January 30, 2017, Infotrac Newsstand.

³²⁵ Andy Cates email correspondence with author, July 9, 2017.

wheels.³²⁶ While the car was in rough shape, once Ewarton verified its authenticity, it became necessary to acquire and restore the vehicle to its 1972 luster. The board purchased it and budgeted between \$20,000 and \$36,500 for the restoration.³²⁷ The custom Cadillac symbolized the high flying days of Stax during the Al Bell administration as well as the flamboyant persona of the *Hot Buttered Soul* and *Shaft* era of Isaac Hayes better than any other artifact or interpretive panel. When designing the exhibition space, architect Frank Ricks insured the placement of the restored vehicle in a central location and created a spinning turntable-like foundation so the visitor will not miss a single square inch of its beauty and ostentatiousness and Hayes warning any interloper to stand back if they crossed the plane between the car and the exhibition floor.³²⁸

Ewarton also subsequently focused on engaging both the neighboring South Memphis community and former Stax artists and employees in the rebuilding process. The development of a coalition of local stakeholders became essential to the Ewarton board's success. Sherman Wilmott recalls, "You just cannot do it with just a museum board, you need the CDCs, the politicians, and the local community too. So our deal was building it with as many coalitions as possible. The problem was that there was not that many coalition pieces to build on, but LeMoyne-Owen College CDC was one when we would go into meetings together." Essential Ewarton's success lie in its commitment to

³²⁶ Bowman, *Soulsville USA: The Story of Stax Records*, 253.

³²⁷ "Renovation of Isaac Hayes' '72 Cadillac" internal memo, June 14, 2002, Stax Museum of American Soul, Memphis, TN.

³²⁸ Frank Ricks, interview by author, via telephone, May 1, 2017.

revitalize the South Memphis neighborhood and never allow the charge of gentrification to take hold.

Local residents were concerned that Ewarton was only interested in a cheap and speculative land grab. Andy Cates assured them that, “Our goal is not to displace or relocate anyone, in fact, if we do that we’ve failed.”³²⁹ LOCCDC Executive Director Jeffrey Higgs emphasized the effort to revitalize the neighborhood by “developing affordable and decent housing, strengthening businesses, and creating jobs within the community for its residents.”³³⁰ Additionally, the various redevelopment groups committed to reach out to the established businesses in the neighborhood to help them survive and thrive in the new environment “by helping them to develop a business plan, apply for a loan, and find any additional funding sources.”³³¹ Ewarton and the LOCCDC held meetings, the first of which attracted over two-hundred residents, each quarter with the local residents to gain insight and to build community buy-in and trust.

The plan to open a music academy to serve the neighborhood’s youth, many of whom were “at-risk,” with an after school and summer music programming also gave the residents a sense of ownership and pride in the effort to rebuild and recontextualize Stax. In addition to several community meetings and outreach initiatives, once the construction began, Ewarton wanted to hire people from the neighborhood to help rebuild Stax

³²⁹ Kate Miller, “Soulsville: A Catalyst for Revival in a Neighborhood with the Blues.”

³³⁰ Pamela Perkins, “Businesses Hope to Benefit from Stax Museum Proposal,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), February 3, 2000, accessed January 30, 2017, Infotrac Newsstand.

³³¹ Ibid.

developing community pride in resurrecting a landmark. Deanie Parker recalled the success of hiring members of the community when the construction commenced in 2001.

We were very careful to reach out to other stakeholders in Soulsville USA, to keep them informed and to get their feedback and engage them in any and every way that we could even insisting that the construction people hire them as day laborers. Which we needed to do because the one thing I was not going to tolerate was anybody saying that this was not a diverse project where everybody was not benefitting . . .

They took pride in laying every brick or sweeping up every bit of trash because they were a part of it. We constructed something that they were proud of during their lifetime. And they also understood that this was theirs as much as it was ours. And we wanted to do it right and we wanted them to take care of it when it was done.

You cannot imagine the return on that kind of investment. It was time, effort, inclusiveness. It made a difference and we began to see that in that poor, decayed neighborhood that while there were people who could not afford to have major reconstruction done, they found some paint and paintbrushes even that made a difference.

Having those campaigns, Soulsville USA, it was vital. During the entire time of construction, we only had one incident where somebody took anything from any of the construction workers. And do you know what it was? The guy's broke for lunch, and when they went to get their food to eat outside on a sunny day, their lunches were gone. Somebody was hungry. That was the only thing missing. No tool theft, none of that.³³²

The neighborhood also saw that Ewarton did not cut corners in its rebuilding efforts and the project proved nothing short of world-class. That feeling and realization, Ewarton hoped, would become contagious from both inside and outside the South Memphis neighborhood.

³³² Deanie Parker, interview by author, Southaven, MS, April 3, 2017.

The Happy Song (Dum-Dum): The Stax Museum and Stax Music Academy Open

Lovely, lovely songs
 Sweet soul songs
 Those good old happy songs
 It gives ya such a feeling
 A lovely, lovely feeling
 It makes you want to shout
 In fact it knocks you out!
 Otis Redding, "The Happy Song (Dum-Dum)," 1968.³³³

After operating as quietly as possible for two years to accomplish its goals and to make the project a reality, Ewarton announced the details for the Stax Museum and Stax Music Academy at LeMoyne-Owen College on February 8, 2000. Sadie's Soul Food Kitchen, a local restaurant and South Memphis mainstay, catered the event.³³⁴ Tim Sampson recalled the events of this day.

We had food that we thought the people at Stax would have eaten like Ritz crackers with American cheese, vanilla wafers, and cheese. We found these retro orange sodas and had them in big old metal barrels and Vienna sausages, and all kind of stuff. It was kind of a big tent revival. All these former Stax people were there, the Mayor [Herenton], and all the dignitaries. It was wild.³³⁵

In addition to the building and an interpretive plan for the museum, the announcement also included the membership of its newly formed board of directors. The board consisted of board chairman Andy Cates, Staley Cates, Charles Ewing, George Johnson of LeMoyne-Owen College, Reverend Kenneth Robinson, Howard Robertson, Jr., and

³³³ Otis Redding, "The Happy Song (Dum-Dum)," by Otis Redding and Steve Cropper, released on April 8, 1968, Volt 45-163, 45 rpm.

³³⁴ In addition to its soul food, Sadie's held cat fighting contests and players balls where the man who brought the most women to the venue received \$25.

³³⁵ Tim Sampson, interview by author, Memphis, March 8, 2017.

Deanie Parker, who became Ewarton's full-time President and Executive Director in May. Also noted was the appointment of Sherman Wilmott as Ewarton's Vice President and Museum Curator.³³⁶

Deanie Parker stated that in addition to commemorating the history of Stax in the museum, the music academy was an essential component to preserve the history and to serve the current neighborhood residents.

We felt the academy could really make a difference in the revitalization of this area. Most of the kids here are being raised by single mothers with incomes of less than \$15,000 a year. Less than fifty percent of the families in the immediate Soulsville area have automobiles, so we wanted to make a difference to the children of the area.³³⁷

Many former Stax artists and employees attended including Stax co-founder Estelle Axton, former co-owner and President Al Bell, and former Stax hitmaker, William Bell. LeMoyne-Owen President George Johnson stated, "I thought I was coming to a press conference this morning. But it turns out we were coming to a revival meeting."³³⁸ Rufus Thomas, Carla Thomas, Isaac Hayes, Wayne Jackson, and Mavis Staples served as the first teachers in the Music Academy's inaugural after school and summer programming. Their participation bears witness to Ewarton's success in engaging the

³³⁶ "Soulsville, USA Revitalization Development and Concept Plan," circa 2000, Stax Museum Archive, Memphis, TN.

³³⁷ Lottie L. Joiner, "Stax Museum: An Unforgettable Trip to Soulsville," *The Crisis*, July/August 2003, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://books.google.com/books?id=BUMEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA50&dq=Stax%20Museum&pg=PA51#v=onepage&q=Stax%20Museum&f=true>

³³⁸ Jim Hanas, "Plans Unveiled for Proposed Stax Museum," *Memphis Flyer* (Memphis), February 10-16, 2000, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/backissues/issue573/cr573.htm>.

people who were so essential and vital to the history and essence of Stax, many of whom still bore the scars from Stax's demise and its internal conflicts.

Ewarton soon changed its name to the Soulsville Foundation in September of 2000 and the neighborhood soon followed its lead in rebranding itself. From then on South Memphis became known as Soulsville. The Soulsville Foundation board hired both Looney Ricks Kiss Architects (LRK) and Self + Tucker Architects to design both the Stax Museum of American Soul and the neighboring Stax Music Academy. Both firms had recently designed the expansion of the National Civil Rights Museum and LRK received national accolades for its work on AutoZone Park, a minor league baseball stadium for the Memphis Redbirds AAA team in Downtown Memphis. Unable to find any architectural renderings of the original Capitol Theater or Stax building, Soulsville located the measurements taken by the Pyramid organization in 1989. Despite the demolition of the original building, its foundation remained and served as a reference point for the architects. Additionally, forensic architecture from photographs along with Stax employee and artist interviews provided further evidence for an accurate and authentic rebuild. Together the architects and Soulsville decided to recreate the building similar to its appearance in 1967. Using the various forms of evidence, the architectural firms designed a museum as close to Stax's original dimensions, though slightly larger to accommodate ADA compliance and its desire to hold large functions.³³⁹ However, the architects and Soulsville insured the exact location, footprint, contours, and schemes of

³³⁹ Frank Ricks, interview by author, via telephone, May 1, 2017.

Studio A, the place where Stax recorded the majority of its 800 singles, 300 albums, fourteen number one hits, and Grammy and Oscar Award-winning tracks.³⁴⁰ Together they hired 1220 Exhibits to fabricate the exhibits. For the Music Academy building, they agreed to not create a scheme and look similar to the museum. Instead, “Its aesthetics are a blend of the historic neighborhood street to acknowledge its place in the community and today’s funk and eclecticism to attract area student.”³⁴¹ Soulsville budgeted eight-million dollars for the construction of both buildings with an additional two-and-a-half million dollars for exhibition costs and memorabilia acquisition.

The Soulsville Foundation broke ground on April 20, 2001. The shovels hit the dirt a mere twelve years after the city razed the original building, ten years after LeMoyne-Owen College began its Community Development Corp initiative, and three years after Staley Cates called for an impromptu meeting on Stax’s empty lot. While the construction crews began the rebuilding effort, the Music Academy launched SNAP (Soul Nurtures Artistic Performance), a play on the famous Stax logo on June 1, 2000. SNAP enrolled seventy-five young men and women from the Soulsville neighborhood in a summer music camp at Stafford Elementary School while it awaited the completion of the Music Academy adjacent to the Stax Museum. At the end of the summer, SNAP held a grand finale concert at the University of Memphis. “People were seeing that whatever

³⁴⁰ Due to ADA requirements, a ramp replaced the stairs from the control room to the live room in Studio A. However, they turned the studio into an effective exhibit space.

³⁴¹ “Project Statement: 2004 AIA Honor Awards for Architecture,” 2004, Looney Ricks Kiss Architects Collection, Memphis, TN.

we were doing, we were going to help kids and that was the plan” recalled Tim Sampson.³⁴²

Within a year, the 27,000-square foot Stax Music Academy building opened with both a summer music academy and after school programming. Originally, the music department at LeMoyne-Owen College planned to relocate to the Stax Music Academy building, however, internal conflicts led to the decision to remain at its original on-campus facility. Despite that setback, SNAP and the Music Academy succeeded in reaching hundreds of neighborhood children each year and in providing them with a safe place to express themselves and thrive in the spirit of the original Stax Records. Deanie Parker observes, “What we’re attempting to do is restore an anchor to the community, so it will serve and restore the community in much the same way the original Stax Records did. This is an operation to give the children an alternative. I have yet to meet a child who doesn’t respond to music.”³⁴³

Almost two years to the date of the groundbreaking ceremony, the Stax Museum of American Soul Music opened to universal and worldwide acclaim on May 3, 2003, after a soft open on April 29. To celebrate, the museum promoted a three-day concert event featuring Isaac Hayes, Mavis Staples, Booker T & the MG’s. Carla Thomas, Wilson Pickett, and dozens of other Stax and soul artists. The celebration paid posthumous tribute to Otis Redding, Rufus Thomas, and Johnnie Taylor. Other events planned by the

³⁴² Tim Sampson, interview by author, Memphis, March 8, 2017.

³⁴³ Craig Meek, “Soulsville Landmarks Begin Taking Shape,” *Memphis Business Journal*, December 7-13, 2001, 26.

Stax Museum to celebrate its opening included conference luncheons, guest speakers, guided tours, a benefit celebrity golf tournament, and the showing of the recently digitally remastered film, *WattStax*.

Visitors gazed upon an outer structure that perfectly recreated the original Stax facade and marquee as it existed in 1967. Mud Island donated the “Stax Records” tile sign recovered in 1989 and it serves as the only original piece on the outer structure. Al Bell remembers his feelings as he first arrived at the Stax Museum and Music Academy.

I turned the corner out on McLemore, looked up and saw that marquee. And it impacted me so much until I stumbled off the curb into the streets. And as I looked at that marquee, I began to cry once again. But this time, they were tears of joy. For not only had the original building been replicated and placed there on that corner, but the most important part of the spirit of Stax was embodied in the Stax Music Academy, for everything about Stax as it relates to creativity, as it relates to administrative experience and knowledge, was all about teaching.³⁴⁴

However, the neon letters on the museum’s marquee are replicas. The original letters currently reside in two Beale Street nightclubs, Rum Boogie and Alfred’s. Estelle Axton’s Satellite Record Shop now serves as the museum’s gift and souvenir store and resides in the same location as the original. The 17,000-square foot structure features over 2,000 artifacts that, “Outline the roots of American Soul Music, its significant contributors, its alignment to history and heritage, and its enduring presence in society.”³⁴⁵ Upon entering the museum for the first time, David Porter remembers, “It is the weirdest feeling to walk in. The building was leveled, so to see it reconstructed and

³⁴⁴ Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, 377.

³⁴⁵ “Stax Museum Press Release,” 2003, Stax Museum of American Soul Archive, Memphis, TN.

to find everything where it was in the same position - - talk about surreal. It is what it was.”³⁴⁶

The visitor begins their tour in the Soul Awakenings Theater with a twenty-minute film encapsulating the history of both soul music and Stax before entering the exhibit space. The first artifact encountered is another signature piece in the museum, an intact 1906 African Methodist Episcopal [A. M. E.] church from Duncan, Mississippi. The Hoopers Chapel A. M. E. Church, once Deanie Parker’s family house of worship, contextualizes the place so many Stax artists received their first exposure to music and the source of the 1960s soul sound. From there, it is an exploration of the history of soul music and its influences with relevant artifacts and interpretive panels written by Robert Gordon and Randolph Meade Walker. The Soulsville Foundation originally commissioned Rob Bowman, author of *Soulsville USA: The Stax Records Story*, to write the interpretive panels, museum script, and outline the use of photographs and artifacts, but found his draft too lengthy and academic for a music museum audience and scrapped much of his submission. It sought new historians to author the museum’s narrative and interpretative panels. Robert Gordon, the author of such critically praised music history books as *It Came From Memphis* and *Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters*, released his Stax biography, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*, in 2013. Dr Randolph Meade Walker, Minister of the Castalia Baptist Church, possessed a deep knowledge of African American Memphis history and is the author of

³⁴⁶ Tommy Perkins, “‘It Is What It Was:’ Museum Brings Stax Back to Life,” *Memphis Business Journal*, April 20, 2003, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://www.bizjournals.com/memphis/stories/2003/04/21/story3.html>

*The Metamorphosis of Sutton E. Griggs: The Transition from Black Radical to Conservative, 1913 - 1933.*³⁴⁷

Of course, the highlight of the museum experience lies in the rebuilt Studio A. The Stax Museum recreates the dimensions, footprint, contours, colors, and feel of the original space. Deanie Parker recalls, “I knew when I walked in there, and I felt something that I could not explain to you...that we had it.”³⁴⁸ The control room features some of the original recording equipment including the Scully two-track machine onto which Otis Redding recorded both “Mr Pitiful” and “Respect.”³⁴⁹ The live room with its signature sloping floor and “Voice of God” movie speaker, contains instruments from each member of Booker T and the MGs and audio outtakes from various recording sessions.

Upon exiting Studio A, the visitor explores the history of Stax and many its artists, the history of R&B, soul, and blues music, as well as Isaac Hayes’ Cadillac. Towards the end of the tour, the visitor confronts the entirety of Stax’s discography at the “Wall of Sound.” This display possesses a profound impact of the enormous output of the label as it contains over nine-five percent of the thousand-plus original records and singles released by Stax and its affiliate labels from 1957 through 1975. With such a well-designed interpretive plan and artifacts, it is no wonder that leading tourist guide,

³⁴⁷ “Notice to All Prospective Appointees to Shelby County Boards, Authorities, or Commissions,” September 30, 2009, <https://agenda.shelbycountyttn.gov/sirepub/cache/2/0usajjrwxmelpj1m3ybf0mir/10828607292021102202600.PDF>, accessed July 29, 2021.

³⁴⁸ Deanie Parker interview with author.

³⁴⁹ Museum label for Scully Two-Track Recorder, *Control Room*, Memphis, TN, Stax Museum of American Soul, March 7, 2017.

Frommer's, raved, “Elvis's playground aside, this 17,000-square-foot retreat for music lovers, on the original site of Stax Records, is the most celebrated attraction in town; it is number-one on the list that many in-the-know Memphians keep of things to do in their city.”³⁵⁰

In recounting the effort and campaign to rebuild and revitalize Stax, Andy Cates reflected on what could serve as a playbook for other similar efforts. In an email to the author in July 2017, Cates offers the following advice from his experience leading the Stax Museum and Music Academy project.

1. **Capital** – You have to have a committed capital base, in hand, to start this kind of thing. We had hugely generous capital committed, and it was given by generous souls who didn't want ANY credit, so in addition to having immediate credibility, we had the currency of giving credit to others (including politicians).
2. **Leadership** – At every level, but including someone at the helm guiding the ship and a small Board (or if have a big Board, one that has a small Exec Committee that does all of the work).
3. **Sense of Urgency** – You must either have a real deadline or create one. Time kills deals and longer it goes, less likely it will happen. Plough grant was helpful there as well (meant to add that they put a deadline on it).
4. **Luck** – In this case, and as previously mentioned, this one was ordained. But, whether you believe that or not, so many cards have to fall your way.
5. **Passion** – We had that in huge supply, and racially united. There was massive tailwind of folks who were deeply hurt that it had been torn down, as well as broad group who got the vision and saw why it was no brainer (especially for Memphis).
6. **Ego suppression** – If you have one person or even a small group of people saying this is their project or they did it, it won't work. Everyone has an ego and

³⁵⁰ Kristin L. Luna, “The Stax Museum of American Soul,” *Frommer's*, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://www.frommers.com/destinations/memphis/attractions/the-stax-museum-of-american-soul-music>

wants to be appreciated (including me), but if that's not balanced, and sometimes suppressed, it creates huge self-defeating hurdle. And, another challenge is when someone doesn't take credit and another person or group steps into that vacuum and takes the credit (which creates resentment). This is tough stuff! Ever since the project started, we've generally had egos (including mine) under control.³⁵¹

All of these serve as a solid template to any and all attempting a similar project to that of the Stax Museum, as it accounts for not only what took to be successful but the challenges and pitfalls similar organizations will likely face.

The *Commercial Appeal* estimated the combined efforts of the Soulsville Foundation and LeMoyne-Owen College Community Development Corp in the strategic development zone of Soulsville caused more than \$100 million dollars to flow into the revitalized South Memphis neighborhood between 2001 and 2006.³⁵² However, while the crime rate dropped, the neighborhood appears less blighted, and now possesses an anchor attraction, it has yet to entice many new businesses to the area to serve the residents or Stax Museum tourists. With the economic uncertainty after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, LeMoyne-Owen facing a two-million dollar shortfall in 2002, and its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation hanging in the balance, the progress in Soulsville slowed. While Soulsville property values and average household incomes rose, it is still amongst the lowest not only within the Memphis city limits, but in the country. There is still no grocery store, restaurants, or other establishments one typically finds in a similar area. When the LeMoyne-Owen College

³⁵¹ Andy Cates email correspondence with author, July 9, 2017.

³⁵² Pamela Perkins, "City Coordinates 'Anchor' Projects for Neighborhood," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), April 8, 2001, accessed January 30, 2017, Infotrac Newsstand.

CDC and the Stax Museum promised to move its accounts, the National Bank of Commerce opened a branch in Soulsville in 2001. It was the first bank to do so in over twenty years.³⁵³ However, Soulsville remains a work in progress, its revitalization taking longer than most imagined. Perception, rather than fact, may serve as one of the chief obstacles. Tim Sampson in 2017 noted “It [The Soulsville Neighborhood] still carries the stigma of a dangerous South Memphis neighborhood. A lot of people think we were crazy to do what we did here. I don’t agree with that at all!”³⁵⁴ The progress towards the original goal, while slow, continues and cannot be underestimated for its community improvement, economic stimulation, neighborhood rebranding, and its positive effect and influence on the children of Soulsville.

³⁵³ June, “A South Memphis Renaissance,” A23-A24.

³⁵⁴ Lance Wiedower, “Mapping the Decline and Revival of Soulsville USA,” *High Ground News*, March 8, 2017, www.highgroundnews.com/features/the-soul-of-memphis-on-the-ground.aspx, accessed August 11, 2018.

- Chapter Six -

**Blues Stay Away from Me: The Rise and Fall of King Records,
1943 - 1972**



Image Eight: King Records Buildings, photo by author.

Life is full of misery; Dreams are like a memory
 Bringing back your love that used to be.
 Tears so many I can't see; Years don't mean a thing to me
 Time goes by and still, I can't be free.
 Delmore Brothers, "Blues Stay Away from Me," 1949.³⁵⁵

In 2000, political upstart John Cranley lost the election to unseat Republican Steve Chabot and represent Ohio's First Congressional District, which encompasses approximately eighty percent of Cincinnati. The twenty-six year old recent graduate of both Harvard Law School and Divinity School was the youngest candidate for Congress that year. His youth and energy captured the attention of MTV's *True Life* documentary series, though the network did not air the episode until two weeks after the election. Despite the eight point loss, Cranley's political star was quickly on the rise. When a Cincinnati City Council seat became vacant after election night, Cranley landed that seat and became the chair of the Law and Public Safety Committee. Elliott Ruther, a high school friend of John Cranley, who also possessed very little political experience, served as the campaign manager for Cranley's Congressional bid and then on his staff at City Hall. Within four months of his appointment and only six months after his loss of the Congressional election, one of the largest race riots in the United States since the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 broke out in Cincinnati.

On the evening of April 7, 2001, two off-duty police officers spotted and chased Timothy Thomas, who had several outstanding misdemeanor traffic-related warrants, in

³⁵⁵ The Delmore Brothers, "Blues Stay Away from Me," by Alton and Rabon Delmore, Henry Glover, and Wayne Raney, recorded on May 6, 1949, King 803AA, 78 RPM disc.

the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. The Over-the Rhine neighborhood was a predominately African American neighborhood and though it bordered the Central Business District, it remained one of Cincinnati's poorest and most underdeveloped areas. Within minutes of the chase, Officer Steve Roach shot and killed Timothy Thomas. Like many race riots, the Cincinnati riot that broke out on April 9 in the largely African American neighborhoods of Over-the Rhine, Avondale, and Walnut Hills, and eventually downtown on April 11, stemmed from years of frustration with persistent police brutality, racial profiling, and in this case, fifteen deaths of African Americans since 1995 by or in the custody of the largely white police force. Though not all fifteen were the result of overt racism, it angered the African American populace that in a city where they made-up less than forty percent of the population, they made up one-hundred percent of deaths at the hands of or in the custody of Cincinnati Police in the same time period. Only a few weeks prior to Thomas' death, several local organizations along with the Black United Front, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Boman Tyehimba, filed a complaint outlining many of the defects of the Cincinnati Police Department and its treatment of the African American population.³⁵⁶

For a week after April 7, there were several violent and non-violent demonstrations and incidents, including one that led city officials to close City Hall and some protesters shoving John Cranley.³⁵⁷ When the Council reformed after the end of the

³⁵⁶ Howard Wilkinson, "It's Been 20 Years Since the 2001 Civil Unrest in Cincinnati," *91.7 WXVU*, <https://www.wxvu.org/local-news/2021-04-05/its-been-20-years-since-the-2001-civil-unrest-in-cincinnati>, accessed January 19, 2022.

³⁵⁷ "Timeline," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 13, 2001, p. 14, newspapers.com, accessed December 18, 2018.

unrest and enacted several policies, it also caused serious introspection from its members as to best create a fair and equitable city of Cincinnati. Elliott Ruther recalls, “The City of Cincinnati was looking at itself. How racist are we? How are we dealing with economic disparity?”³⁵⁸

After two election cycles in less than two years and a tumultuous first year in office, Cranley and Ruther decided on a road trip to Memphis in 2002 for an impromptu vacation. Both Cranley and Ruther were fans of the various musicians from and who recorded in Memphis. The pair visited Sun Records, Elvis Presley’s Graceland, the Beale Street Historic District, and the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel. Both discovered some comparisons between Memphis’ social and racial history with that of Cincinnati. While Memphis has a larger black population and a more violent racial past, Cincinnati shared in some degree the same questions on how to overcome that hurdle. They observed how Memphis interpreted, marked, and celebrated its cultural and musical history. Although both men were born a few years after King Records closed its Cincinnati offices on Brewster Avenue both understood the label’s significance. Cranley and Ruther began to wonder why something similar could not be done in Cincinnati, especially given King Record’s positive and trail-blazing record in civil rights. King Records, much like Stax Records possessed a multi-cultural workforce who held positions at all levels of the corporate structure and conducted integrated recording sessions. While the successful preservation of the King Records building was still two

³⁵⁸ Elliott Ruther interview with author, August 9, 2018.

decades away from the events of the early 2000s, the idea and the path for its preservation and interpretation began a few years after Starday Records, who purchased King Records, closed the Cincinnati doors in 1972.

Days Gone and Past: The Historic Significance of King Records

Some remember the place,
Some remember the hour,
And they can remember it well...
Spirit of Memphis Quartet "Days Gone and Past," 1949.³⁵⁹

Syd Nathan established King Records in 1943. When he died in 1968, his heirs sold King Records to Starday Records in Madison, Tennessee, who soon shuttered the Cincinnati headquarters. The King complex is a collection of several building on Brewster Avenue owned by two separate entities. Nathan purchased the two easternmost buildings, whose tax records identify them as 1540 and 1544 Brewster Avenue. He subsequently rented the attached western structure, 1536 Brewster, from the Dumbacher family who owned the building and operated the Avondale Ice Company and a skating rink since the turn of the century. The Dumbacher family rented the facility to King, so that when Starday shuttered the Cincinnati location, Starday sold the 1540 Brewster buildings and terminated the lease to 1536 Brewster cluster of buildings that once housed King Records' studios and offices.

³⁵⁹ Spirit of Memphis Quartet, "Days Gone and Past," traditional and arranged by Earl Malone, recorded December 12, 1949, 78 rpm, King 4340 AA.

Syd Nathan was born on April 27, 1904, in Cincinnati, Ohio. While he dropped out of school in ninth grade and suffered from poor eyesight and asthma, Nathan attempted to succeed on his own including stints as a drummer, a wrestling promoter, and as the owner of a jewelry store, pawnshop, chain of shooting galleries, photo-finishing business before he ventured into the music business. In 1938, he opened Syd's Record Shop first on West Fifth Street and later moved to 1351 Central Avenue, where he sold used jukebox records to a clientele that consisted largely of African Americans and recent southern white transplants to Cincinnati.³⁶⁰ His customers requested more race and hillbilly records and the few record labels that existed at the time focused primarily on pop and mainstream music. That demand, in addition to the popularity of WLW-Cincinnati's *Boone County Jamboree*, a weekly barn dance show in the vein of WSM-Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*, provided Nathan the evidence a market existed for new hillbilly records.

In 1943, Nathan started King Records, with the audacious but soon to be appropriate motto, "The King of Them All," with two records recorded in Dayton, Ohio by Grandpa Jones and Merle Travis as the Shepard Brothers. Jones, Travis, along with Alton and Rabon Delmore, the Delmore Brothers, performed on the *Boone County Jamboree*, and were also frequent customers at Syd's Record Shop. Thus began one most important and influential record companies in the history of the music industry, one that brought modern country, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, funk, gospel, bluegrass, and

³⁶⁰ Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 7-9.

soul music to prominence. King quickly grew into one of the largest record companies in the 1950s and 60s.

Nathan was also an innovator in how he developed and expanded his record company beyond the typical label business structure in several ways. First, King Records became one of the only integrated employers in both Cincinnati and in the music industry. Additionally, many African Americans and other minorities held executive positions within the company. David Sanjek in “What’s Syd Got to Do with It? King Records, Henry Glover, and the Complex Achievement of Crossover” observed, “The company advertised a nondiscriminatory hiring policy, even though popular opinion held that, being a border town, Cincinnati could not support a multiracial workforce.”³⁶¹ In 1951, Nathan explained this to *Saga* magazine.

We gave everyone an even break. This is because I’m a Jew, and I know what obstacles are. A Jew may have it rough, but a Negro has it a lot rougher. And a good man is a good man; his religion or race isn’t going to make a difference . . . At King we pay for ability, and that’s what we get. Our people get along fine together, and we aren’t fooling when we say we don’t discriminate.³⁶²

Second, Nathan founded a successful and influential publishing company, Lois Music, which acquired an ownership stake in many of the original songs written by King artists. This acquisition led Nathan to encourage his hillbilly artists to cover the rhythm and blues songs he owned and vice versa. This cross-pollination helped create a new sound that became rock and roll in the 1950s. King’s head of A&R and staff producer and

³⁶¹ David Sanjek, “What’s Syd Got to Do with It? King Records, Henry Glover, and the Complex Achievement of Crossover,” *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 318.

³⁶² Ibid.

songwriter, Henry Glover, recalled, “In many ways, he [Syd Nathan] was a remarkably open minded man. He perceived this wonderful notion of American music as not being segregated into different styles, but one big cross-ethnic whole. He did that because it was a way to make money.”³⁶³ Third, Nathan expanded King Records to include all facets of record production, promotion, and sales within his Brewster Avenue complex. King Records became the first independent label since Gennett Records in the 1920s to control the process from the production of the masters in its own studio, to pressing the records, to developing its own distribution network in order to both sell and promote the releases both regionally and locally. This widespread distribution network along with its pressing plant, allowed King to carry other labels, predictably supplement its income, and grow into one of the largest record companies of its time.

Syd Nathan’s role in popularizing so many genres, including the birth of rock and roll, bluegrass, soul, and funk, led to his induction into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997 and the International Bluegrass Hall of Fame in 2006, along with many of King’s former artists and employees. Nathan was the leader and driving force behind the King label, studio, and business, so much so that his death in 1968 led to the sale of the company, which quickly dissolved soon after.

Nathan also served as a mentor to so many future record executives, including Seymour Stein, who initially worked summers at King while still in high school in New York. Stein co-founded Sire Records in 1966 and signed the Ramones, the Talking

³⁶³ John Hartley Fox, “King of the Queen City,” radio documentary, circa 1980s, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music Archive, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN, 2 CDs.

Heads, Madonna, the Pretenders, and Depeche Mode, thus the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted him in 2005. “I loved Syd. I really, really did. I’ve had great mentors. Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler [of Atlantic Records]. Paul Ackerman [of *Billboard* magazine]. George Goldner [of Red Bird, Tico, and Roulette Records]. All but George are in the Hall of Fame. But Syd Nathan was the most influential. He became like a second father to me.”³⁶⁴

To help fill the demand for hillbilly records in his record store, Syd Nathan approached Grandpa Jones and Merle Travis, both stars of the *Boone County Jamboree* on WLW-AM, about making records on his label. In September 1943, the three travelled to Dayton, Ohio to record four sides for the newly founded King Records. Due to contractual obligations to WLW, Jones and Travis recorded under the pseudonyms the Sheppard Brothers (Jones and Travis) and Bob McCarthy (Travis). Unfortunately, due to Nathan’s inexperience, substandard recording quality, and poor pressings that caused most of King 500 and 501 to come out warped, the records sold poorly.

Not to be deterred by the absolute failure of his first two releases, Nathan tried again in 1944 with a handful of releases. The next series of sides recorded for the King label included future Country Music Hall of Famers Grandpa Jones and the Delmore Brothers (Alton and Rabon), as well as Hank Penny and the duo of Bill and Evalina.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Jason Cohen, “Shellac in My Veins,” *Cincinnati Magazine*, March 1, 2008, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://www.cincinnati.com/citywiseblog/shellac-in-my-veins3/>.

³⁶⁵ Michael Ruppli, *The King Label Discography, Volume 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 1-2.

By August of 1944, Nathan was confident that King Records was a legitimate business. He took several steps to move the company to the next level and insure its future success. First, he incorporated the company in Ohio. Second, Nathan secured an investment of \$25,000 from family members and named them as partners, including “Nathan’s sister, Dorothy Halper; Doris Nathan, the wife of Nathan’s brother, Davis; Bernice Steinberg, a cousin; Howard Kessel, another cousin; and family friend Lawrence Sick.”³⁶⁶ Howard Kessel headed up King’s pressing division, Royal Plastics. Third, King Records entered into a five-year lease on a 10,000 square foot brick and concrete building that was a former chemical extraction plant at 1540 Brewster Avenue. This building served as King’s headquarters for over twenty-five years.

The 1540 Brewster Avenue structure was erected c.1917 and served as the base for Evanston Garage and Repair until Fries and Fries Chemical began its occupancy in 1940.³⁶⁷ Just two years before King Records moved in, Fries and Fries Chemical Company’s one-thousand gallon acid tank exploded and injured two of its employees.³⁶⁸ Due to the condition of the building, Nathan and his partners spent a few months performing manual labor to clear out the remnants of the chemical plant. Once cleared, they installed record pressing machines in order to control the manufacture of the releases by King Records. Additionally, King soon occupied both neighboring properties at 1544

³⁶⁶ Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 51.

³⁶⁷ “Real Estate Transfers,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 13, 1940, accessed October 24, 2017, newspapers.com.

³⁶⁸ “Two Workmen Are Injured In Evanston Tank Explosion,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 11, 1942, accessed October 24, 2017, newspapers.com.

Brewster Avenue, which it purchased for storage and manufacturing purposes in December 1944, from the City Ice and Fuel Company³⁶⁹, and the former Avondale Ice Company building at 1532 - 1538 Brewster Avenue.

The new company started with sixty workers and later expanded production when the United States Government lifted wartime restrictions on materials and equipment necessary to the manufacture of 10,000 78 RPM discs per day with plans to expand production capacity to over 25,000.³⁷⁰ Additionally, Nathan envisioned a publishing company as a part of the King Records concern and soon started Lois Music to exploit and administer its musical composition copyrights. “The company is to have its own song writers and will issue recordings of new songs only.”³⁷¹ The new facility began impressively, as the first record pressed at 1540 Brewster Avenue was Cowboy Copas’ “Filipino Baby” b/w “I Don’t Blame You” on King 505.³⁷² The recording reached number four on *Billboard’s* Hot Country chart in 1946.³⁷³

By 1946 King increased its release schedule and grew to approximately 175 employees, who manufactured an average of 16,000 records per day at the Evanston plant.³⁷⁴ Included in the ramped up release schedule, were four records that reached the

³⁶⁹ “Deals Include Store Units, Parcel for Sears Expansion,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 13, 1944, accessed October 24, 2017, newspapers.com.

³⁷⁰ “Company is Formed; To Make Recordings; Located in Evanston,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 12, 1944, accessed October 24, 2017, newspapers.com.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Randy McNutt, *Images of America: King Records of Cincinnati* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 7.

³⁷³ Joel Whitburn, *Hot Country Songs, 1944 - 2008* (Menomonee, WI: Record Research, Inc., 2008), 104.

³⁷⁴ J.F. Cronin, “Strummin’ ‘Geetar’ is Music to Millions, So Hillbilly Record Company Prospers,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 27, 1946, accessed September 26, 2017, newspapers.com.

top of the Hot Country chart: Hank Penny's "Steel Guitar Stomp" (King 528, peak #6) and "Get Yourself a Red Head" (King 540, peak #4),³⁷⁵ along with the Carlisle Brothers' "Rainbow at Midnight" (King 535, peak #5)³⁷⁶ and the Delmore Brothers' ground-breaking "Freight Train Boogie" (King 570, peak #2).³⁷⁷

The Delmore Brothers were among the popular close-harmony singing groups who starred on WSM's *Grand Ole Opry* in the 1930s, but who fell in popularity at the close of that decade. They found a new style by incorporating other genres, specifically the beat of blues, boogie, and rhythm and blues. Country music historian Charles Wolfe observed the following.

The brothers' longtime interest in the blues found new inspiration. At the same time, a new style known as 'country boogie' was producing hit records for Porky Freeman and Arthur Smith. Syd Nathan was eager to get a piece of the action. With 'Hillbilly Boogie,'³⁷⁸ he did, and the Delmore's found themselves riding the crest of yet a third career.³⁷⁹

This new sound proved both popular in the 1940s and the forefather to the rockabilly music made famous by Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis in the early 1950s.

Also in 1946, King began releasing Rhythm and Blues sides on its new affiliate label, Queen Records. Initially, Nathan signed Benjamin "Bull Moose" Jackson, Earl

³⁷⁵ Whitburn, *Hot Country Songs*, 321.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 79.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁷⁸ This was both the title of their 1945 record and the name given to the new sound.

³⁷⁹ Charles Wolfe, *Classic Country: Legends of Country Music* (New York: Routledge Press, 2001), 201.

Bostic, and Todd Rhodes, in addition to purchasing eight masters by Memphis Slim from Hy-Tone Records.³⁸⁰ Benjamin “Bull Moose” Jackson’s “I Know Who Threw the Whisky (In the Well)” (Queen 4116) peaked at number four on the *Billboard* Rhythm and Blues chart.³⁸¹ Additionally, Lennie Lewis and his Orchestra reached the R&B chart with “Blue Fame” (Queen 4133, peak #5).³⁸²

With the increased level of releases, being banned from the only studio in town, Herzog Music, and Nathan’s desire to control every step of the record making process, King installed a recording studio in the back of the loading dock area at 1536 Brewster Avenue in 1947. Additionally, Nathan dropped the Queen name and transferred the Rhythm and Blues releases to the King label. Despite the increased output, only three releases landed on the charts. Pianist Moon Mullican’s “New Pretty Blonde (Jole Blon)” (King 578, peak #2) along with his follow-up, “Jole Blon’s Sister” (King 632, peak #4), reached the *Billboard* Hot Country charts.³⁸³ Bull Moose Jackson’s “I Love You, Yes I Do” (King 4181) reached the number one spot and spent twenty-six weeks on the *Billboard* Rhythm and Blues chart.³⁸⁴

With the overwhelming success of Bull Moose Jackson, the 1940s closed out with a run of hits on both the country and R&B charts that affirmed that the label was “The

³⁸⁰ “King Eyes Race Biz; Inks Bostic, Rhodes,” *Billboard*, January 22, 1949, accessed October 20, 2017, ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1039920848?accountid+4886>.

³⁸¹ Joel Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles, 1942-1999* (Menomonee, WI: Record Research, Inc., 2000), 211.

³⁸² Ibid., 263.

³⁸³ Whitburn, *Hot Country Songs*, 289.

³⁸⁴ Joel Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 211.

King of Them All” in both genres. Additionally, Nathan announced the expansion of its distribution network with the addition of eight new branches, thus increasing the number of offices to fourteen, which allowed the company to distribute other labels. The first label added for distribution was New Jersey-based DeLuxe Records, which King eventually purchased outright in 1950. King located its new regional offices in Detroit, Atlanta, Washington, DC, St. Louis, Kansas City, Jacksonville, New Orleans, and Nashville. King also expanded Royal Plastics’ facility adjacent to the company’s headquarters.³⁸⁵ By the end of the decade, this increased production and distribution abilities led to King selling over six-million discs annually.

Another key innovation that led to the rise of King Records was Nathan’s development and use of a professional studio band that he used not only on King’s country sides, but also on many of its R&B cuts. The session band concept was the forerunner of not only the Nashville recording scene that developed in the 1950s, but the way R&B and soul music labels like Stax and Motown recorded in the 1960s. The King house band included Louis Innis (bass and guitar), Henry “Homer” Haynes (guitar), Kenneth “Jethro” Burns (mandolin), Wayne Raney (harmonica), Country Music Hall of Fame inductee Red Foley (bass), Zeke Turner (guitar), Jerry Byrd (steel guitar), Tommy Jackson (fiddle), Hank Garland (guitar), and Shorty Long (piano), to name a few.³⁸⁶ In addition to playing on both King’s country and R&B sides, the session band under the

³⁸⁵ “King Diskery Adds Eight Distrib. Arms: Nathan Elected Prexy,” *Billboard*, February 28, 1948, accessed October 20, 2017, ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1040009711?accountid=4886>.

³⁸⁶ Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, *Little Labels, Big Sound* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 62-63.

supervision of Henry Glover helped to forge the recognizable “Cincinnati Sound,” “a bluesy music tinged with a country feel, (that) combined black and Appalachian heritages.”³⁸⁷

In 1949, the Delmore Brothers scored a number one hit with “Blues Stay Away from Me” (King 803),³⁸⁸ a song co-written and produced by Henry Glover. In 2007, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted “Blues Stay Away from Me” into its Grammy Hall of Fame. “The Grammy Hall of Fame was established by the Recording Academy's National Trustees in 1973 to honor recordings of lasting qualitative or historical significance that are at least twenty-five years old. Inductees are selected annually by a special member committee of eminent and knowledgeable professionals from all branches of the recording arts.”³⁸⁹

King also succeeded with its releases on the R&B charts despite the field becoming more competitive with the founding of several independent labels including Chess, Atlantic, Imperial, Modern, Peacock, Aladdin, and Specialty. King scored number one hits with Wynonie Harris’ “Good Rockin’ Tonight” (King 4210), Lonnie Johnson’s “Tomorrow Night” (King 4201), and Bull Moose Jackson’s “I Can’t Go On without You” (King 4230). Like many of the King releases, Lonnie Johnson’s “Tomorrow Night” and Wynonie Harris’ “Good Rockin’ Tonight” not only sold well, but influenced the next generation of rock and R&B artists. For example, Peter Guralnick in *Last Train to*

³⁸⁷ Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, *Little Labels, Big Sound*, 66.

³⁸⁸ Whitburn, *Hot Country Songs*, 121.

³⁸⁹ “Grammy Music Hall of Fame,” National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, accessed November 22, 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/hall-of-fame>.

Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley, recalls the impact of these two recordings had on a young Elvis Presley. “Tomorrow Night” was one of the songs Elvis performed often in his formative years. Presley attempted “Tomorrow Night” at his first recording session at Sun Records in 1954.³⁹⁰ Though unreleased, it eventually appeared on several late century Sun Records collections. Additionally, Elvis later that year recorded “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” a song owned by King’s publishing affiliate, Lois Music, on Sun. The RIAA certified Presley’s “Good Rockin’ Tonight” cover on Sun as Gold in 2005 for its over 500,000 US sales.³⁹¹ The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted Harris’ recording of “Good Rockin’ Tonight” into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 2009.³⁹²

In addition to the records that both charted and sold well, King released recordings by legendary artists who succeeded at other labels either before or after their time at King in the 1940s. This list included John Lee Hooker (both under his name and the pseudonym Texas Slim), Minnie Pearl, Swan’s Silvertone Singers, J.E. Mainer’s Mountaineers, Wade Mainer, Mary Lou Williams, Curly Fox, Gatemouth Moore, Hot Lips Page, and the Spirit of Memphis Quartet. Nathan acquired masters and ownership stakes in several other labels to expand his release schedule. In 1947, Nathan purchased part of the DeLuxe label in New Jersey and released new recordings and reissues by

³⁹⁰ Peter Guralnick, *The Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1994), 131.

³⁹¹ “Gold and Platinum Records,” Recording Industry Association of America, accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=good+rockin#search_section.

³⁹² “Grammy Music Hall of Fame,” National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/hall-of-fame>.

Benny Carter, Paul Gayten, Roy Brown, Smiley Lewis, Dave Bartholomew, Harry Choates, and the Billy Eckstine Orchestra which featured Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Oscar Pettiford, and Gene Ammons, to name a few. Nathan acquired the DeLuxe label outright and all its master recordings in 1950. Another group of legendary artists came from a pressing and distribution relationship with the Sensation label in Chicago. King released recordings that featured such jazz luminaries as Sonny Stitt, Milt Jackson, Max Roach, JJ Johnson, and Chano Pozo.³⁹³

As King moved into the 1950s, several of its top country artists moved to major labels, but Nathan solidified King's dominance on the R&B charts, purchased other labels, and vastly expanded its operations. While King deftly controlled the production and manufacturing process, it still faced problems with sales and promotion. Nathan decided to forgo the use of the oft-unreliable third-party regional distributors and built a coast-to-coast distribution network that mirrored the ones used by the major record labels. Jon Hartley Fox in *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records* observed:

To solve King's distribution problems, Nathan emulated the major labels and set up his own system of regional branch sales offices. These offices handled only King products, representing the label to retail accounts, jukebox operators, and radio stations. At its peak, the network included thirty-three branch offices in such major cities as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as in such regional music centers as Cincinnati, Detroit, Memphis, Philadelphia, Dallas, Nashville, and Charlotte. As the sales reps at these offices made contacts within the industry and learned the ropes of local promotion, the branch offices grew into an invaluable resource for King Records.³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Michael Ruppli, *The King Labels, Volume 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 151.

³⁹⁴ Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 59.

King also used these offices to scout for local talent that might be of interest to the label. Additionally, Nathan hired some of the top Artist and Repertoire (A&R) men, including Henry Glover, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Ralph Bass, and Eli Oberstein to expand King's release schedule.

Nathan hired Henry Glover, a trumpet player and arranger with Tiny Bradshaw, Buddy Johnson, and Lucky Millinder in 1949 as King's recording director. Glover was the second African American to hold an executive position at a record label.³⁹⁵ Additionally, Glover helped build and design the recording studio, including the echo chambers that gave King records its distinctive full sound.³⁹⁶ Glover worked with both King's R&B and country artists and possessed a keen ability to arrange the country songs King owned for its R&B artists and vice versa. Glover was the first African American to produce country records. He worked on some of the genre's most popular and influential sides, including the Delmore Brothers' "Blues Stay Away from Me," which he cowrote. Glover organized several sessions he produced with an integrated studio band that performed on both the country and R&B sides. Glover also composed part or all of many of King's hit records, including "Teardrops on Your Letter," "Annie Had a Baby," "I'll Send My Ship Along at Today's Funeral," and "Drown in My Tears." As noted music historian Nelson George observed in *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, "At King Records in Cincinnati, everybody knew about Syd Nathan and his cigars but few recognized that

³⁹⁵ The first was J. Mayo Williams at Paramount Records in the 1920s and later at Decca.

³⁹⁶ Steve Tracy, "King of the Blues: The Story of a Record Label. Henry Glover Interview," *Blues Unlimited*, editors Bill Greensmith, Mike Rowe, and Mark Camarigg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), accessed October 15, 2017, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt175x2qx.29>, 405.

arranger Henry Glover was critical to actually making the music happen in the studio.”³⁹⁷ Despite this successful partnership, Glover left after Nathan mostly blamed him for King’s role in the payola scandal in the early 1960s. Upon his departure, Glover formed his own label, Glover Records, and later worked with Roulette Records. When Starday purchased King, Glover briefly returned to head the new partnership in 1972 and produced and worked on albums for other labels by Muddy Waters, Tommy James, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks, and the Band. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences named him to its Honor Roll of A&R and Producers in 1986. The Blues Hall of Fame inducted him in 2013.

On November 1, 1950, Nathan announced he started a subsidiary label, Federal Records, to “experiment with new talent along the lines of RCA Victor’s plan with Bluebird.”³⁹⁸ He hired Ralph Bass to lead it. Bass left Savoy Records where he had produced hit records by Johnny Otis, “Little” Esther Phillips, and Brownie McGhee. The new label and its leader soon proved a successful combination, as Bass signed and produced some of King’s biggest R&B and soul artists including the Dominoes, Hank Ballard, Little Willie Littlefield, and James Brown. Additionally, Bass signed and produced the Platters, who went on to worldwide acclaim when they later recorded for Motown Records. Bass keenly observed that the audience for Rhythm and Blues music expanded to white consumers during his tenure at King. His seminal R&B and soul hits

³⁹⁷ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 37.

³⁹⁸ “King Sets New Label for Testing Talent,” *Billboard*, November 1, 1950, accessed October 20, 2017, ProQuest, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu:3443/login?url+https://search.proquest.com/docview/1286107243?accountid=4886>.

included “K.C. Loving,” “Sixty Minute Man,” “Please, Please, Please,” and “Work with Me Annie.” For most of these recordings, Bass used the Johnny Otis Orchestra as the session band.³⁹⁹ He left King in 1959 for the same reasons Henry Glover departed a year earlier. He quickly landed a similar role at Chess Records, where he produced sides with Etta James, Muddy Waters, and Howlin Wolf. In 1991, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted Ralph Bass as did the Blues Hall of Fame in 2003.

Nathan hired Eli Oberstein in 1951 to expand King’s output of popular and mainstream music. Previously, Oberstein, one of the more colorful and controversial figures in the history of the recording industry, served as the head of A&R at RCA Victor from 1929 through 1939, where he launched the careers of Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, and Xavier Cugat.⁴⁰⁰ He held similar roles with both Varsity, Royale, and Majestic, where he largely reissued recordings from the 1920s and 1930s labels such as Gennett, Paramount, and Crown, before joining King. While Oberstein and King failed to produce any hits during his brief stay, he did record Petula Clark, actor Mickey Rooney, Jimmy Rushing, and a young Steve Lawrence.⁴⁰¹ Steve Lawrence became famous as a result of his pop hits in the late 1950s and early 1960s, collaborations with his wife, Eydie Gormé, and his appearance on television and motion pictures as both an actor and host.

³⁹⁹ Norbert Hess, “I Didn’t Give a Damn if Whites Bought It! Ralph Bass Interview,” *Blues Unlimited*, editors Bill Greensmith, Mike Rowe, and Mark Camarigg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), accessed October 15, 2017, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt175x2qx.30>, 430.

⁴⁰⁰ Allen Sutton, *Eli Oberstein’s United States Record Corporation: A History and Complete Discography, 1939–1940* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2014), vi.

⁴⁰¹ Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 180.

The turn of the decade led to King's domination on *Billboard's* Rhythm and Blues charts between 1950 and 1952, including several number ones: Roy Brown's "Hard Luck Blues" (DeLuxe 3304, 1950), Earl Bostic and his Orchestra's "Flamingo" (King 45-4475, 1951), and two by the Dominoes, which featured future Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee and leader of the Drifters, Clyde McPhatter. The Dominoes hit number one with "Sixty Minute Man" (Federal 45-12022, 1951) and "Have Mercy Baby" (Federal 45-12068, peak #1, 1952). In 2015, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted "Sixty Minute Man" into its Grammy Hall of Fame. It should also be noted that though they did not chart, the Dominoes recorded nine sides in 1952 with Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Grammy Hall of Fame inductee Jackie Wilson as their lead vocalist.

Despite King's success in R&B, the label's dominance on the country charts began to fade in the early 1950s. Many of its artists signed with other labels, mostly the majors. The Carlisles left for Mercury, Grandpa Jones for RCA Victor, Homer and Jethro for Columbia, Cowboy Copas and Moon Mullican left and eventually reappeared on Starday, and Hawkshaw Hawkins went to Columbia. Rabon Delmore died in 1952 and Alton after suffering from poor health, passed away in 1964. Sadly, both Hawkins and Copas died in the plane crash in 1963 that also killed country music superstar Patsy Cline in Camden, Tennessee. Despite those losses, while deemphasizing its once omnipresent place on the country charts, King scored several Top Ten hits including Moon Mullican's Henry Glover produced number one smash, "I'll Sail My Ship Alone" in 1950.

Over the next three years (1953-1956), King continued to dominate the R&B charts, thanks largely to its increased A&R and promotional efforts, in addition to the signing of two of its biggest selling artists, Hank Ballard and James Brown, by Ralph Bass. King's ability to cross many of its R&B singles and some of the country sides over to the pop Top 40 chart that proved a major accomplishment at a time when the radio and record retailers were just as segregated as the nation. The records that crossed over onto the *Billboard* Top 40 charts between 1953 and 1956 included Otis Williams and His Charms' "Hearts of Stone" (DeLuxe 6062, peak #15, 1954),⁴⁰² Boyd Bennett and his Rockets landmark rockabilly record "Seventeen" (King 1470, peak #5, 1955),⁴⁰³ Bonnie Lou's "Daddy-O" (King 4835, peak #14, 1955),⁴⁰⁴ Little Willie John's "Fever" (King 4935, peak #24, 1956),⁴⁰⁵ and Bill Doggett's instrumental classic "Honky Tonk (Parts 1 & 2)" (King 4950, peak #2, 1956).⁴⁰⁶ The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted Doggett's recording of "Honk Tonk (Parts 1 & 2)" into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 1998.⁴⁰⁷

Little Willie John's recording of "Fever," written by Otis Blackwell and Eddie Cooley, was not only a crossover hit for King Records, but became a staple of popular music and covered by artists from many genres and from multiple generations. A small

⁴⁰² Whitburn, *Top 40 Hits*, 122.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁰⁷ "Grammy Music Hall of Fame," National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/hall-of-fame>.

sample of artists who scored a hit with their version of “Fever” included Peggy Lee (1958), Elvis Presley (1960), the McCoys (1965), James Brown (1967), Rita Coolidge (1972), Madonna, who’s version landed on the top spot of the US Dance charts (1992), Michael Buble (2003), Beyonce (2010), and Martone (2017).

During the mid-1950s, several of King’s R&B releases reached the number one spot on the charts, which included Hank Ballard and the Midnighters’ “Work with Me Annie” (Federal 12169, 1954) and “Annie Had a Baby” (Federal 12195, 1954), Otis Williams and the Charms’ “Hearts of Stone” (DeLuxe 6062, 1954), Bill Doggett’s “Honky Tonk (Parts 1 & 2)” (King 4950, 1956), and Little Willie John’s “Fever” (King 4935, 1956).⁴⁰⁸ These recordings solidified King’s place as the top R&B label and dozens more reached the Top Ten of *Billboard*’s R&B chart during this three year span.

In 1955, James Brown recorded a demo of “Please, Please, Please” at WIBB-AM in Macon, Georgia, which every R&B label subsequently turned down, including Specialty, Chess, and Duke. However, WBML-AM in Macon began airing the demo and it quickly became a local hit. The local King distribution office, headed by Gwen Kessler, alerted Ralph Bass of its popularity. Soon Bass and Chess Records founder, Leonard Chess, raced to sign Brown with Bass succeeding in inking James Brown to a contract.⁴⁰⁹ On February 4, 1956, Brown and his band, the Famous Flames, arrived at the King studio in Cincinnati to record their debut single, the already regionally popular, though

⁴⁰⁸ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*.

⁴⁰⁹ James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1986), 73-75.

unreleased, “Please, Please, Please” as well as “I Feel That Old Feeling Coming On,” “Why Do You Do Me (Like You Do)?,” and “I Don’t Know.”⁴¹⁰ However, Syd Nathan stopped the session and argued against the merits of Brown’s “Please, Please, Please.” Brown recalls Syd Nathan’s vociferous objection, which Nathan voiced half way through the first take of “Please, Please, Please.”

“What’s that? What in the hell are they doing? Stop the tape,” he [Nathan] yelled. “That doesn’t sound right to my ears.” He was in a rage. “What’s going on here?” He turned to Gene Redd [King’s musical director], who just shrugged because he didn’t understand it either. Then he turned to Ralph Bass. “I sent you out to bring back some talent, and this is what I hear. The demo is awful, and this is worse. I don’t know why I have you working here. Nobody wants to hear that noise.” . . . “It’s a stupid song. It’s got one word in it. I’ve heard enough.” He [Nathan] stormed out of the room and up the stairs to his office.⁴¹¹

After much discussion and negotiation, Brown and his band completed their recording session and King released “Please, Please, Please” a month later on March 3. Despite King’s lack of promotional support, “Please, Please, Please” slowly climbed up the R&B charts and eventually sold over a million copies. Little indicated that with this rocky but successful beginning, James Brown was to become one of the most important and influential figures in the history of popular culture both in the United States and throughout the world. Jon Hartley Fox concluded:

James Brown was the most important musician to record for King Records - the most important, most influential, most innovative, and most misunderstood. Brown was a musical revolutionary who changed the world. The influence of James Brown’s music is universal at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One hears it in American hip hop, funk, and rock, the Afro-pop of Nigeria, Mali, and other countries, Jamaican reggae, and in the playing of musicians of the

⁴¹⁰ Michael Ruppli, *The King Labels, Volume 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 610.

⁴¹¹ James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*, 78.

twentieth century, probably only Louis Armstrong and Elvis Presley had a comparable impact.⁴¹²

Without a doubt, Brown soon became King's most prolific and best-selling artist on its roster, and his innovations led the soul and funk music revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it took a few years and a few dozen releases for Brown to truly hit his stride. Brown recorded many of these landmark recordings in King's Cincinnati studio.

The last three years of the 1950s found King with a few Top Forty and Top Ten R&B hits, including James Brown's "Try Me" (Federal 12337, peak #1, 1958), and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' "Teardrops on Your Letter" (King 5171, peak #4, 1959). Another R&B record of note, was the B-side to Ballard's "Teardrops on Your Letter," "The Twist" (King 5171, peak #16).⁴¹³ However its explosion into popular culture occurred a few months later with an almost note for note cover version by Chubby Checker.

Hank Ballard wrote the "The Twist" and Lois Music published it, but King believed "Teardrops on Your Letter" possessed hit potential from the November 11, 1958, session in King's Cincinnati studio.⁴¹⁴ Though Ballard's 1959 recording of "The Twist" was a minor hit, the song became a worldwide popular culture sensation a few months later when Dick Clark, host of the popular *American Bandstand* television show, heard it. But more than the song's catchiness, it was the accompanying dance that truly inspired

⁴¹² Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 163.

⁴¹³ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*.

⁴¹⁴ Ruppli, *The King Labels, Volume 2*, 616.

Clark. Despite previous hits much larger than “The Twist,” Clark never extended an invitation to Ballard, as he found their lyrics dirty and not conducive to the clean image he sought to cultivate for rock. For whatever reason, many of which are surrounded more by rumor, speculation, and legend rather than fact, Ballard and the band never made it to *American Bandstand* to perform the song that inspired American teenagers to dance. Rather than wait, “Clark recruited young Ernest Evans, a local amateur singer and mimic, to take the stage and lip-synch along to Ballard’s singing on the record.”⁴¹⁵ Additionally, Clark arranged for Evans, now known as Chubby Checker due to his resemblance to Fats Domino, to record a note for note rendition for local Philadelphia-based Parkway Records. Released on October 8, 1960, Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” (Parkway 811) landed on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 pop chart and peaked at number one. Parkway rereleased it the following year for another eighteen week run on the Hot 100 and again it reached the top spot.⁴¹⁶ Checker’s album *Twist with Chubby Checker* (Parkway 7001) spent forty-two weeks on the album chart and peaked at number two.⁴¹⁷ Soon, “The Twist” crossed over many demographic barriers. Men and women of all ages attended nightclubs and parties to perform their own version of the dance and set into motion the revolutionary decade.

Besides being the only dance to cross the modern generational gap, the Twist changed the way Americans danced. It broke away not only from the rules of leading and following - it broke all rules! And it set off a string of copycat dances - the Hully Gully, the Pony, the Frug, the Monkey, the Mashed Potatoes,

⁴¹⁵ Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*, 103.

⁴¹⁶ Whitburn, *Top 40 Hits*, 123.

⁴¹⁷ Whitburn, *Top 40 Albums*, 53.

and any number of other gyrations and twitches not seen since the medieval St. Vitus Stomp - that urged people, particularly whites, to forget the comportment they'd inherited from European ball rooms and 'express themselves' (a fatuous sixties mantra of ever there was one) with their bodies on the dance floor. As their dancing became more uninhibited, it created a kind of mass possession, a mild frenzy that brought relief and release from self-absorption. At the same time, these dances, despite their standard of physical separation between partners, bonded them together with a tribal immediacy. They also provided a way for dancers to flaunt the era's restrictive sexual codes, and in that regard the Twist and its many variations helped set into motion the nation's musical, social, cultural, and political upheavals of the latter sixties.⁴¹⁸

In 2014, *Billboard* declared Chubby Checker's cover of the Hank Ballard penned song was the top single in the 1960s above such artists as the Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, the Rolling Stones, Louis Armstrong, and Otis Redding.⁴¹⁹ Other accolades for Checker's recording of Ballard's tune included its induction in to the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2000 and the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2013.

While Chubby Checker dominated the charts with his cover of Hank Ballard's "The Twist," King released several Hank Ballard and the Midnighters singles between 1960 and 1961 that became both pop and R&B hits, including a reissue of "The Twist." Recorded on March 31, 1960, in the King studio,⁴²⁰ "Finger Poppin' Time" (King 5341) became Ballard's first pop cross-over hit and spent thirteen weeks on the Hot 100 chart,

⁴¹⁸ Jim Dawson, *The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance that Changed the World* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1995), xii-xiii.

⁴¹⁹ Elias Leight, "The Top 20 Billboard Hot 100 Hits of the 1960s," *Billboard*, October 27, 2014, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6296373/billboard-hot-100-1960>.

⁴²⁰ Ruppli, *The King Labels, Part I*, 111.

peaking at number seven,⁴²¹ and twenty-one weeks on the R&B chart, peaking at number two.⁴²² The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences nominated Ballard's "Finger Poppin' Time" for a Grammy in the "Best Rhythm & Blues Performance" in 1960 along with La Verne Baker, Bo Diddley, John Lee Hooker, Etta James, Jackie Wilson, Muddy Waters, and the eventual winner, Ray Charles.⁴²³ Ballard's follow-up single (King 5400), "Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go," recorded in the King studio on July 26, 1960,⁴²⁴ landed at number one for three of its fifteen weeks on the R&B charts⁴²⁵ and peaked at number six during its eleven week run on the Hot 100.⁴²⁶ With this run of hits and his role in defining the sound of rock and soul, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted Hank Ballard in 1990.⁴²⁷ And in 2012, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted his band, the Midnighters, which included Henry Booth, Billy Davis, Cal Green, Arthur Porter, Lawson Smith, Charles Sutton, Norman Thrasher, and Sonny Woods.⁴²⁸

Despite King's absence from the country charts in the late 1950s, it never fully abandoned the genre and scored a few hits in the 1960s with a few ground-breaking artists. King landed a number one hit with Hawkshaw Hawkins' "Lonesome 7-7203"

⁴²¹ Whitburn, *Top 40 Hits*, 47.

⁴²² Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 20.

⁴²³ Thomas O'Neil, *The Grammys* (New York: Perigee Books, 1993), 48.

⁴²⁴ Ruppli, *The King Labels, Part I*, 119.

⁴²⁵ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 20.

⁴²⁶ Whitburn, *Top 40 Hits*, 47.

⁴²⁷ "Hank Ballard," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, accessed November 9, 2017, <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/hank-ballard>.

⁴²⁸ "The Midnighters," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, accessed November 9, 2017, <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/midnighters>.

(King 5712, 1963). King released Hawkins' single three days before he, Patsy Cline, and Cowboy Copas died in a plane crash on March 5, 1963, in Camden, Tennessee.⁴²⁹ The Stanley Brothers' "How Far to Little Rock" (King 5306, 1960),⁴³⁰ peaked at number seventeen on the country chart. While this was the only Stanley Brothers' records to chart at King, Dr. Ralph Stanley went on to have a successful career recording and performing his influential style of bluegrass music.

On the day the Stanley Brothers recorded their version of Ballard's R&B hit, "Finger Poppin' Time," King's best selling artist, James Brown, was also in the Cincinnati studio to make his next series of hit records. Dr. Ralph Stanley recalled the opportunity and artistic freedom Syd Nathan offered them after Nashville had all but closed the door on them as it moved into the pop / "countrypolitan" sound in the 1960s in his 2009 autobiography, *Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times*.

The thing about Syd (Nathan) was, he really ran the whole show top to bottom; he was the king of King, and he lorded over his little empire in an ugly old factory building in Cincinnati. Syd had it all right there under one roof: recording studio, pressing plant, distribution and art departments, business and A&R divisions, and manufacturing. Syd even made the cardboard for the album covers...One thing I want to say right off. I've heard so many tales about Syd Nathan yelling and screaming and carrying on, and most of it is probably true, but he always treated us excellent and extra good, just as nice as could be. In fact, he never did say a loud word to us in the studio and it saved him time and money, I don't rightly know. I think it was because he respected us as professionals, and it was the same after Carter died when I went solo. Whatever reason, I've never been treated better by any man in business than Syd Nathan.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Whitburn, *Hot Country Songs*, 184.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 398.

⁴³¹ Dr. Ralph Stanley and Eddie Dean, *Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times* (New York: Gotham Books, 2009), 207.

After Ralph Stanley's brother Carter's death in 1966, Ralph became the leader the Clinch Mountain Boys and recorded a few solo sides at King through 1969 before leaving to record for the legendary bluegrass label, Rebel Records. While he enjoyed a successful recording and touring career, Stanley experienced a resurgence when the hit movie, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*, featured his recording of "Oh Death." The soundtrack with Stanley's recording became the best selling album in 2001. It also won both the 2002 Grammy award for "Best Soundtrack" and the prestigious "Album of the Year."

In addition to King's success in country music in the 1960s, it also succeeded with many jazz recordings during this period as well. In 1958, Bethlehem Records signed a distribution deal with King and by 1962, Nathan acquired the label outright. Included in the records released and reissued in this partnership include albums and singles by such jazz luminaries as Nina Simone, Charles Mingus with Bill Evans, Mel Torme, Duke Ellington, Herbie Mann, the Four Horns with Maynard Ferguson, Dexter Gordon, Oscar Pettiford, JJ Johnson, Kai Winding, Milt Hinton, Jack Teagarden, Carmen McRae, the Art Blakey Quintet and Art Blakey's Big Band both of which included renowned saxophonist John Coltrane, amongst others.⁴³² In 2000, the National Academy of Recording Artist and Sciences inducted Nina Simone's 1958 Bethlehem recording "I Loves You, Porgy" from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* into its Grammy Hall of Fame.

While King prevailed with many its country and jazz recordings, the label's real impact lie in its R&B and soul recordings in the 1960s. While the overwhelming

⁴³² Ruppli, *The King Labels*, Volume 2, 627-672.

majority of King's chart successes came from James Brown, it also scored hits with over a dozen artists, including Little Willie John, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, and 2012 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Freddie King and his hit "Hide Away." In 1999, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted Freddie King's "Hide Away" into its Grammy Hall of Fame. Additionally, King landed a number fourteen R&B hit with Albert King's "Don't Throw Your Love on Me so Strong." Though King Records dropped the 2013 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee in 1964, Albert King broke through after he signed with Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee, and released over a dozen hits.

Also of note in King's R&B release schedule was the reissue of an early Otis Redding recording. Redding's 1960 release of "Shout Bamalama" b/w "Fat Girl," originally on Confederate 135, appeared on King 6149 in 1961.⁴³³ While the single failed to make much of an impact, Redding soon became one of the biggest selling artists a few years later when he recorded for Stax Records. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted Redding in 1989.

Without a doubt, James Brown became the centerpiece for King Records in the 1960s with a consistent release of successful singles and albums on both the pop and R&B charts. Additionally, Brown used his hard fought creative control to push the boundaries of R&B and soul music and innovated new sounds and business practices that still influence artists and the industry today. While Brown released a series of hits

⁴³³ Ruppli, *The King Labels, Part 1*, 394.

between 1960 and 1963, it was the release of a ground-breaking live album in 1963 that truly propelled both Brown and King Records to the next level.

James Brown and his manager, Ben Bart, noticed a gap between record sales and the attendance and enthusiasm displayed by his audiences at his concerts. By then, Brown earned the title “The Hardest Working Man in Show Business” and proved it night after night. That energy and dynamism did not translate as well on his sound recordings, which though largely cut live in the Cincinnati studio were limited to the tight timing and the predictable song arrangements required by radio for airplay. When Brown approached Syd Nathan about recording a live album, Nathan vociferously objected. Jon Hartley Fox reviewed Nathan’s reasoning for his rejection of the live full-length album concept.

Predictably, Nathan hit the ceiling, explaining in a loud and profane manner why the idea was crazy: King was a singles-orientated company; Brown was a singles-orientated artist who had cracked the Top Forty only once; black people didn’t buy albums; white people who bought albums had never heard of James Brown; radio stations would have a hard time fitting an album into their playlists; and there wouldn’t be any hit singles.⁴³⁴

Not to be deterred, Brown offered to fund the \$5,700 production of the master himself, though Nathan finally relented and sent Hal Neely and King house engineer Chuck Seitz to supervise the October 1962 recording at the famed Apollo Theatre in Harlem.

Brown took full control of the run of dates, including renting the venue and outfitting the ushers in tuxedos. “I wanted the audience to feel that a James Brown performance was something special, and I wanted the people who worked at the Apollo

⁴³⁴ Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 166.

to be clean and presentable,” recalled Brown.⁴³⁵ King released *Live at the Apollo* in January 1963, and radio had an interesting and unprecedented reaction. Rather than choosing a single track to play, many radio stations broadcasted the entire album. From the moment of its release, *Live at the Apollo* was a smash success, spending thirty-three weeks in the Top Forty sales chart, two of which were at the number two position.⁴³⁶ While *Live at the Apollo* was not the first live album, its success caused record labels to release similar concert albums by the artists on its roster. The Library of Congress’ National Recording Preservation Board included Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* on its National Recording Registry in 2004. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences inducted the album into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 1998. *Rolling Stone* magazine placed *Live at the Apollo* in the twenty-fifth spot in its 2012 “500 Greatest Albums of All Time” special edition.⁴³⁷ The magazine listed it number one in its 2015 article, “50 Greatest Live Albums of All Time.”⁴³⁸

After a brief contractual dispute between Syd Nathan and James Brown in 1964, Brown returned to the King label in 1965 with the beginnings of a new sound that set off the next wave of popular music, funk. The earliest incarnation of the next wave in popular music is found in Brown’s first Top Ten hit, “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag”

⁴³⁵ Brown and Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*, 133-134.

⁴³⁶ Whitburn, *Top 40 Albums*, 43.

⁴³⁷ “500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 2012, accessed November 5, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/james-brown-live-at-the-apollo-20120524>.

⁴³⁸ “50 Greatest Live Albums of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, April 29, 2015, accessed November 5, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/50-greatest-live-albums-of-all-time-20150429/james-brown-live-at-the-apollo-1963-20150429>.

(King 5999, peak #1 R&B and #8 Top 40, 1965).⁴³⁹ Brown and his band emphasized the riff and rhythm over the melody and harmony. Additionally, they accented the first beat rather than the downbeat of two and four, or as it became known “on the one.” Brown observed the following.

You can hear the band and me start to move in a whole other direction rhythmically. The horns, guitar, the vocals, everything was starting to be used to establish all kinds of rhythmic accents... What most people don't realize is that I had been doing the multiple rhythm patterns for years, but Mr [Hal] Neely and I had agreed to make the rhythms on the records a lot simpler.⁴⁴⁰

In addition to the sales and chart success, “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” won the 1965 Grammy Award for “Best Rhythm and Blues Recording.”⁴⁴¹ Brown immediately followed this smash hit up with an even bigger one, “I Got You (I Feel Good)” (King 6015, peak #1 R&B and #6 Top 40, 1965).⁴⁴² NARAS inducted both recordings into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999 and 2013, respectively.

Between 1966 and 1971, James Brown recorded twenty-five Top Ten R&B hits, all of which crossed over on to the pop Top 40 chart and/or reached number one. This prolific period caused *Billboard* to recognize Brown as the number one R&B artist in the history of the chart. In this ranking, *Billboard* placed Brown above such artists as Michael Jackson, Prince, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and the

⁴³⁹ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 51.

⁴⁴⁰ Brown and Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*, 149.

⁴⁴¹ O’Neil, *The Grammys*, 105.

⁴⁴² Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 51.

Temptations.⁴⁴³ Brown's number one R&B hits included "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World" (King 6035, #8 Top 40, 1966), the funk classic "Cold Sweat" (King 6110, #7 Top 40, 1967), "I Got the Feeling" (King 6155, #6 Top 40, 1968), "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" (King 6187, #10 Top 40, 1968), "Give it Up or Turnit a Loose" (King 6213, #15 Top 40, 1969), "Mother Popcorn (You Got to Have a Mother for Me)" (King 6245, #11 Top 40, 1969), and "Super Bad" (King 6329, #13 Top 40, 1971).⁴⁴⁴ In 1966, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences nominated "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World" for a Grammy in both the "Best Rhythm & Blues Recording" and "Best Rhythm and Blues Solo Vocal Performance (Male or Female)" categories, though Brown lost to Ray Charles' "Crying Time" in both categories.⁴⁴⁵ Despite those loses, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences did induct "It's a Man's, Man's World" into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 2010, along with "Cold Sweat" in 2016, which Brown recorded in King's Cincinnati studio. In addition to this string of hit singles, Brown recorded a Top Ten album, *A Soulful Christmas* (King 1040, peak #10, 1969), in King's Cincinnati studio.⁴⁴⁶

In addition to the seven number one R&B hits, King released eighteen Top Ten R&B James Brown sides during this period, including "Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 627.

⁴⁴⁴ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 51-52.

⁴⁴⁵ O'Neil, *The Grammys*, 118.

⁴⁴⁶ Whitburn, *Top 40 Albums*, 298.

Machine” (King 6318, peak #2, 1970).⁴⁴⁷ NARAS inducted "Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine” into its Grammy Hall of Fame in 2014.

Also of significance from this period of James Brown’s releases was “Funky Drummer,” which he recorded in King’s Cincinnati studio on November 20, 1969.⁴⁴⁸ Released in 1970, King 6290 reached the Top Twenty of the R&B charts.⁴⁴⁹ However, its impact on popular music and culture was not felt for another decade, when artists and producers transformed it into the bedrock of hip hop music. “Funky Drummer” contains an eight bar drum break played by Clyde Stubblefield that became the most sampled sound recording in history. Hip hop artists in the 1980s and 1990s such as Public Enemy, Run-DMC, LL Cool J, De La Soul, Ice-T, NWA, A Tribe Called Quest, Dr Dre, and DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince sampled that break beat and used it as the inspiration and foundation for their new recordings. In addition to the hip hop artists, pop and rock artists such as Sinead O’Connor, Prince, Ed Sheeran, George Michael, Nine Inch Nails, Madonna, and the Fine Young Cannibals used the “Funky Drummer” break beat sample. Daniel Kreps of *Rolling Stone* recounted the impact of Stubblefield’s twenty-second drum solo.

The drum break served as the backbeat for countless hip-hop tracks, ranging from Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," "Bring the Noise" and "Rebel Without a Pause" to N.W.A's "F**k tha Police" and Dr. Dre's "Let Me Ride" to LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out," Run-D.M.C.'s "Run's House" and Beastie Boys'

⁴⁴⁷ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 51-52.

⁴⁴⁸ Ruppli, *The King Labels, Part 1*, 430.

⁴⁴⁹ Whitburn, *Top R&B Singles*, 52.

"Shadrach." Even Ed Sheeran's "Shirtsleeves" and George Michael's "Freedom '90" were among the over 1,000 songs to sample Stubblefield's beat.⁴⁵⁰

Producer and *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* bandleader, Questlove, summarizes the influence of the “Funky Drummer” break beat.

When you talk about the most perfect beat, it's not even that, 'Funky Drummer' wins in a technical aspect. But in an artistic aspect, it is hands down the most perfect beat you can loop — it's very lyrical, very melodic, very rhythmic. It's perfect. It's magical. Everyone I know as a producer, that's gotten their start hip-hop production, they all have their story about the first time they heard 'Funky Drummer.'⁴⁵¹

But “Funky Drummer” was not the only James Brown recording sampled on modern rap and pop records. “WhoSampled’s database covers over 200,000 songs, keeping track of who’s sampling whom. They have found that James Brown (the Godfather of Soul) has been sampled two-times more than the second most sampled artist.”⁴⁵² Producers and artists used everything from full instrumental passages to single shouts from Brown’s King discography to help craft their new sound recordings.

In 1970, Brown replaced his band with a new ensemble he dubbed the JBs. This group included Cincinnati-native William “Bootsy” Collins on bass. While Collins recorded on some of Brown’s hits including "Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine,” “Bewildered,” "Super Bad,” and "Soul Power,” Collins left a year later over a

⁴⁵⁰ Daniel Kreps, “Clyde Stubblefield, James Brown's 'Funky Drummer,' Dead at 73,” *Rolling Stone*, February 18, 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/clyde-stubblefield-james-browns-funky-drummer-dead-at-73-w467805>.

⁴⁵¹ “QuestLove on Clyde Stubblefield,” Crimes Against Music, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://charmicarmicat.blogspot.com/2011/03/questlove-on-clyde-stubblefield.html>.

⁴⁵² “The Most Sampled Artists of All Time,” *Priceonomics*, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://priceonomics.com/the-most-sampled-artists-of-all-time/>.

financial dispute and soon joined George Clinton's popular and ground-breaking funk ensemble, Parliament. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted Collins and Parliament in 1997.

For all intents and purposes, the end of the King Record company began on March 5, 1968, when founder Syd Nathan died of a heart attack. In 1968, James Brown opened an office in King's Cincinnati headquarters and began signing artists and producing sides for the label. Brown placed a metal plaque by his desk that read "I'll Always Remember The Man, S. Nathan."⁴⁵³ But, the Nathan family and the remaining owners of King Records realized that with its current downward trajectory and death of Syd Nathan, the time had arrived to sell the company.

Former King Records A&R executive and general manager Hal Neely, who left King in 1965 for a similar position at Nashville-based Starday Records, oversaw the purchase of the label and merged them together, though the alliance proved short-lived. That same year, LIN Broadcasting purchased the Starday-King Record Company. By 1971, the Brewster Avenue complex closed and United Dairy Farmers, a chain of convenience stores, leased the buildings for use as a warehouse complex that once housed King's studios and offices. A single picture of James Brown remained inside as a reminder of the building's storied past.⁴⁵⁴

In 1971, Neely reentered the picture with his newly formed Tennessee Recording and Publishing Company and purchased the King assets with his partners Jerry Leiber,

⁴⁵³ Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels, Big Sound*, 70.

⁴⁵⁴ Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 190.

Mike Stoller, and Fred Bienstock. In order to afford the purchase, Tennessee Recording and Publishing sold James Brown's recording contract and all of Brown's King Records sound recording and songwriting copyrights to Polydor Records. However, due to a strained partnership, Tennessee Recording and Publishing, minus Hal Neely, kept the songwriting copyrights and sold the King Record catalog to Moe Lytle's Gusto Records in Nashville, where all the King sound recording copyrights minus James Brown's reside today.

Despite its rather quick and unceremonious demise, the impact of both Syd Nathan and his record company reverberate today in many ways. Cincinnati's King Records is significant in the evolution of popular music in America, the history of social justice, and innovation in the record industry in the twentieth century. The company took advantage of the city's location at the crossroads of east-west and north-south to become the only independent label producing both rhythm and blues and country and western music in the post-World War II era. During its quarter century of existence, King signed some of the biggest stars in popular music and recorded well over four hundred hit songs. Some became classics that influenced future generations of musicians and helped give rise to new musical genres. To date, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has inducted over twenty King alumni, including the company's founder. King Records was one of the first racially integrated businesses in both Cincinnati and in the music industry. Many local musicians joined King's studio bands and some went on to famous solo careers. Local youngsters earned pocket money helping musicians move instruments in and out of the

building. The Brewster Avenue buildings served as King's headquarters from its founding in 1943 to a few years after the 1968 death of its founder. They are the only structures associated with this locally and nationally significant company.

The King Records legacy is that of one of the nation's most influential record labels of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. As Shake-It Records co-owner and Cincinnati music historian Darren Blase noted in *The King Records Story*, "King Records revolutionized the process in which music was recorded, manufactured, distributed and promoted."⁴⁵⁵ King Records possessed low overhead and flexibility because almost the entire production process was carried out at the Brewster location. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland erected a plaque in front of the former King Records complex in 2003. The plaque reads, "King Records, 'The King of Them All.' From 1943-1971, King Records forever changed American Music. Owner Syd Nathan gave the world bluegrass, R&B, rock and roll, doo-wop, country, soul, and funk. With stars from James Brown to the Stanley Brothers and its innovative, integrated business model, Cincinnati's King Records revolutionized the music industry."⁴⁵⁶ However, these accolades failed to spur any immediate action or interest to preserve and commemorate King's legacy on Brewster Avenue in Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁴⁵⁵ Darren Blase, *The King Records Story* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 2008), 2.

⁴⁵⁶ "King Records: 'The King of Them All,'" Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Historic Marker, Cincinnati, Ohio.

- Chapter Seven -

**Get Up, Get into It, Get Involved: The Political and Community
Campaign to Save the King Records Buildings, 1980 - 2022**



Image Nine: Interior of King Records facing the recording studio, photo by author.

You better become a part of the call
 You gotta have patience
 Or you won't be called...
 Everybody over there (Get on up)
 Everybody right there (Get into it)
 Everybody over here (Get involved)
 Get involved, Get involved!
 James Brown "Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved," 1970.⁴⁵⁷

Within a few years of its closing, the history of King was all but forgotten in Cincinnati. In 1988, Cincinnati celebrated its bicentennial. To commemorate its two-hundred years of existence, the Cincinnati Historical Society published a 656-page book, *The Bicentennial Guide to Greater Cincinnati: A Portrait of Two Hundred Years*. The editors based the text on the *WPA Guide to Cincinnati* published in 1943 and updated the forty-five year gap between it and the 1988 commemoration. The focus of the new edition lie in a neighborhood by neighborhood history that culminated in a driving or walking tour of the historic built environment and other landmarks. In the introductory essay, the editors discussed their philosophy:

. . . We often regard the familiar places where we live, work, shop, learn, and worship as unremarkable or insignificant: "just old boarded up buildings," "an ordinary shopping center," "another run-down neighborhood," or "my poor old house with leaky plumbing." But those pieces of our everyday environment all have some kind of story behind them. Often these stories are fascinating and are populated with characters who sometimes seem unusual and in other instances, familiar, even though these people lived long ago in places we now live. Frequently, the stories behind different communities, institutions, businesses, or

⁴⁵⁷ James Brown, "Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved, Pt. 1," by James Brown, Bobbie Byrd, and Ron Lenhoff, recorded December 3, 1970, 45 rpm, King 45-6347.

even individual homes are interwoven, so that understanding the background of one place gives insights into the development of another.⁴⁵⁸

This edition did not shy away from buildings that were no longer standing or that became something different. Additionally, it did not fail in identifying current or recent structures whose significance was still evolving and developing. Despite its comprehensive and exhaustive detailing of buildings and sites or all backgrounds and periods of significance, there is not a single mention of King Records or any King recording artist throughout the 656-page book. Not even a sentence or two in its Evanston - Norwood neighborhood chapter, where King Records stood. Ironically, the guide mentions the United Dairy Farmers plant in Norwood but does not mention its then storage facility located a few miles away at 1536 Brewster Avenue. Howard Kessel, a cofounder of King Records and who ran its affiliate pressing plant, Royal Plastics was not surprised. “When we were in Evanston, they [the Cincinnati establishment] never wanted anything to do with us. To them, we were just making records for hillbillies and black people.”⁴⁵⁹ What was true in the mid-twentieth century remained true at the city’s bicentennial, at least for most residents.

Former King producer and songwriter, Charles Spurling, was an exception. In the 1980s, he led one of the first efforts to bring recognition to the company, the people, the legacy, and the recordings of King Records. King Records had employed Spurling in the

⁴⁵⁸ Geoffrey J. Giglierano and Deborah A. Overmyer, *The Bicentennial Guide to Greater Cincinnati: A Portrait of Two Hundred Years* (Cincinnati: The Cincinnati Historical Society, 1988), ix.

⁴⁵⁹ Cliff Radel, “King Records Plant Touches Souls in City,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 21, 1996, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

late 1960s as a staff songwriter and producer. Spurling began reaching out to former artists and employees of King along with their families in an attempt to reclaim and recognize its collective legacy, which included acquiring the Brewster properties. While he did not possess a thorough plan nor did he formalize his vision by creating an organization, Spurling did succeed in reminding people mind the legacy of King Records possessed value and worth. Kent Butts, son of DeLuxe Records, a division of King Records hitmaker Otis Williams of the Charms, recalled, “He was trying to get the families and build it back up and keep the ra-ra going for it. That was in the early ‘80s. They were trying to do it, it’s just that it didn’t have the political push behind it. It didn’t make the news like it did when [Former Cincinnati Mayor Dwight] Tillery got involved.”⁴⁶⁰ But if nothing else, Spurling and others did their best to keep the King name and history alive and discussed.

The Cincinnati City Council elected fellow Councilman, Dwight Tillery, in 1991 to serve as its mayor. Towards the end of his term in 1993, *Cincinnati Enquirer* pop critic, Cliff Radel, asked him about recognizing the Brewster Avenue structure that currently served as the home to United Dairy Farmer’s maintenance department. Radel and fellow *Enquirer* journalist Randy McNutt had begun to recognize King Records and its history in several articles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tillery, who grew up a block away from King and even dumpster dived there in search of broken records to toss like frisbees, did not know that the buildings still stood. Additionally, Radel approached

⁴⁶⁰ Kent Butts interview with author.

both the current occupant, United Dairy Farmers, and owner of the complex, the York family, regarding recognizing or marking the historic impact of King Records in some fashion. In 1973, Hershel York, a Cincinnati based optometrist purchased the 1540 Brewster complex from Tennessee Recording and Publishing Company, which housed the offices and pressing plants. That same year, Herschel York purchased 1536 Brewster from long-time owners, the Dumbacher family, which originally housed the recording studio and James Brown's office.⁴⁶¹ Both Jack Johnston of United Dairy Farmers and the York family possessed an awareness of King's past within those two building complexes, but outside of a photo of James Brown in his old office, neither expressed any interest in further recognition.⁴⁶²

Dwight Tillery's mayorship ended after one term in 1993. Cliff Radel did not give up his pursuit of a formal King Records recognition and he knew his best audience and advocate remained the recently defeated mayor who subsequently won a seat on the City Council. As the newly appointed head of the finance committee, Tillery stated that erecting a plaque at the Brewster Avenue site "wouldn't be difficult to achieve," but while "the plaque could still happen, as chairman of the finance committee, I could have some fun with it. We could get the big companies in town involved." While Tillery did not enumerate what could be included in his "having some fun with it," he was on the record

⁴⁶¹ Herschel York transferred the title of both 1536 and 1540 Brewster to Clifford York. In 1991, the title to both addresses transferred to Jewel York.

⁴⁶² Cliff Radel, "King Plant Deserves Recognition," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 22, 1993, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

for garnering some sort of formal acknowledgment and commemoration of King Records for the first time in Cincinnati's history.⁴⁶³

Tillery and other concerned constituents witnessed King Records' profile increase in 1994. First, Rhino Records, one the largest and most popular reissue record labels, began a series of high profile King-themed releases, the King Master Series, in the heart of the compact disc era. Not only did this series reintroduce great recordings made by Wynonie Harris, Freddie King, and Hank Ballard, some for the first time in the digital era, but its success reaffirmed King Records' place along side peer-labels such as Sun, Chess, and Atlantic in the annals of recorded music history. Second, the Cincinnati campaign attracted its first high profile advocate, hit producer, LaFace Records president, and former Evanston resident, Antonio "L. A." Reid to the cause.⁴⁶⁴

During the thirty-sixth annual Grammy Awards in 1994, Reid won a Grammy as the producer for the Album of the Year, the soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*, featuring Whitney Houston, one of the greatest selling albums of all-time. In an interview with the *Cincinnati Enquirer* about his Grammy win, Cliff Radel asked Reid about his hometown. Reid inquired about the status of King Records, which was only a few blocks from his home and where he took karate lessons as a youth. When he learned that the King

⁴⁶³ Cliff Radel, "Tribute to King Remains Overdue," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 28, 1993, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁴⁶⁴ Antonio LA Reid was born in Cincinnati in 1954 and attended Hughes High School in the Evanston neighborhood. He recalls hanging out near the King Records buildings while growing up before he joined the funk band Pure Essence and later the Deele where he met Kenneth 'Babyface' Edmonds. The two formed LaFace Records in 1989 and produced and released records by TLC, Outkast, Usher, and Toni Braxton. Additionally Reid produced platinum and Grammy-award winning records by Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Pink, Rihanna, and Justin Bieber and served as the President of Arista Records after its founder, Clive Davis, retired in 2000.

Records building still stood, a note of civic pride and responsibility entered his purview. Reid stated, “I have to step up my efforts to get something going at home in Cincinnati. It’s my hometown. I need to pay it back.” He added, “Wouldn’t it be nice to build an entertainment company on the historic property of that old plant? I’d love to see that happen. I’ve got to do it.”⁴⁶⁵ One of the ideas Reid formulated included opening a branch office of his Atlanta-based LaFace Records in the old King location. That fall, Tillery began to organize a loose coalition of factions to champion the King Records cause inside Cincinnati to reclaim the Brewster property and further recognize and honor the legacy while at the same time making it a relevant part of the city of Cincinnati and the Evanston neighborhood.

Dwight Tillery’s coalition included several Cincinnati and Evanston citizens, media members including Cliff Radel and Randy McNutt, and the Evanston Community Council (ECC). In 1957, the African American residents had formed the Evanston Community Council to better identify and represent its interests to city officials. The ECC’s mission is, “Dedicated to the well-being of all residents and to the development of the community through education, business, and spirituality.”⁴⁶⁶ The Council fought the construction of the I-71 expressway but lost. The interstate eventually divided the Evanston neighborhood and overtook the fine residential Herbert Street from the

⁴⁶⁵ Cliff Radel, “Grammy Winner’s Thoughts Turn Home,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 6, 1994, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁴⁶⁶ “Evanston Community Council,” website, <https://evanstoncinci.org/council>, accessed July 31, 2021.

neighborhood.⁴⁶⁷ The expressway's design and construction, though, barely missed running through the King Records building.

Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go: The 1990s Preservation Effort

There's a house honey, way across town
 People coming from miles around
 Put on your pretty red dress
 Let's go see about this mess
 That's it, baby let's git
 And go way far upon the hill
 Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, "Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go," 1960.⁴⁶⁸

In 1994, ECC member Reverend Peterson Mingo of the Grace Temple Baptist Church spoke of a new a day in Evanston, telling its youngest citizens: "Don't allow anyone to tell you, you are insignificant. You are somebody."⁴⁶⁹ One of the ways the citizens of Evanston saw a pathway to a new era of community pride and reinvigoration was through honoring its past and making its storied history relevant and pertinent to young people. They desired not just a preserved relic of past success, but a living breathing place of opportunity and expression. There was no better place to start than at the King Records buildings on the edge of I-71, the very highway that divided their neighborhood two decades earlier.

⁴⁶⁷ *The Evanston Existing Conditions Study and Community Plan* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati City Planning Commission, December 1973), 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, "Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go" by Hank Ballard, recorded in 1960, King 45-5400), 45 rpm.

⁴⁶⁹ Anne Michaud, "Celebration, Messages Diversified," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 30, 1995, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

Together, these various stakeholders and King Records preservationists created the King Records Museum Project Committee in 1994. The committee strategized and discussed methods to raise awareness and buy-in both inside and outside the Evanston neighborhood, how to raise funds, and what should be created inside the Brewster complex when and if they acquired them.⁴⁷⁰ While the majority of the discussions remained in big picture generalities and concepts, the committee did reveal some of its proposed ideas. Dwight Tillery explained that the group wanted to both honor and preserve the past while at the same time, revitalizing it for the neighborhood youth. The committee planned to accomplish this bridge between the past and present through the reopening of the building with a recording studio. Tillery stated that, “We could get a plaque put up, but a plaque means nothing. What if somebody tears down the building? If somehow we could commemorate King’s history, and at the same time give kids a way to express themselves, we could possibly do something. I am not saying it is going to be easy.”⁴⁷¹ Michael Lord, the president of the Evanston Community Council, concurred with Tillery. “A studio could provide young people with hands-on experience and an outlet for something to do during the summers,” as well as a way to build pride and self-esteem along with curbing youth violence.⁴⁷²

The King Records Museum Project committee soon opened a dialogue with the owner of the building, Herschel York. York possessed plenty of skepticism about its

⁴⁷⁰ Randy McNutt interview with author, August 9, 2018.

⁴⁷¹ Randy McNutt, “Music Fans Envision Shrine King Record Co.,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 28, 1994, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

plans especially in regard to the neighborhood's poor reputation and crime rates, but for the right price, he remained open to selling it. York pointed out that United Dairy Farmers had recently signed a three-year lease on the western half of the complex, the portion that once housed King's recording studio. "If Dwight [Tillery] makes me the right offer, I might sell. But I won't donate the building. Besides, if I did sell it to the city, it would take time to get the plans together. In the meantime, Dwight [Tillery] would have a built-in income at the site for three years [from the United Dairy Farmers lease]."⁴⁷³ Whether a sale was imminent or even a price negotiated, with this momentum, Tillery and the King Records Museum Project Committee began exploring the application process to add the Brewster complex to the National Register of Historic Places.

In addition to the King Records Museum Project Committee efforts to develop a strategy to revitalize the King story and the surrounding Evanston neighborhood, it released to the public its desire to apply for recognition on the National Register. At that time, the National Register possessed only a handful of properties associated with musicians and musical performances, but no actual recording studios, record companies, nor record manufacturers. In 1995, Patrick Andrus, a Register historian, noted that only one other building, though there were others including the Ryman Auditorium, could be found on the register that was associated with the music industry as a whole.⁴⁷⁴ Andrus noted the WFIL building in Philadelphia, which was home to Dick Clark's *American*

⁴⁷³ Cliff Radel, "King-Sized Dreams," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 6, 1994, newspapers.com, accessed December 20, 2018.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

Bandstand. By 1995, the National Register delisted the Starr Piano and Gennett Records Administration and 1872 warehouse buildings in Richmond, Indiana due to its blighted and deteriorating condition. The mere entertainment of a nomination for the King Records buildings, especially in its current state in 1994, would break new ground in the National Register of Historic Places program.

Jon Hartley Fox's 2009 King Records biography recounted the efforts of the King Records Museum Project Committee. Fox detailed the history of the property and the efforts to save and preserve it in *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*. Fox summarized the efforts of Dwight Tillery and the King Records Museum Project Committee in the 1990s, but he failed to understand the National Register criteria and process for nomination.

[Dwight] Tillery headed a movement to get the Brewster Avenue building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, maintained by the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. To qualify for such status, a building must meet four criteria; it must be (1) the site of a historic event; (2) associated with historically significant people; (3) architecturally significant; and (4) archeologically significant. Because King headquarters scored low on the last two counts, making the Register will be difficult.⁴⁷⁵

Fox thought a National Register property needed to meet all four criteria of eligibility and be initiated by the property owner. The property need not prove significant in each of the four criteria, rather must present a compelling argument in only one of the four.

Additionally, a National Register nomination should be approved by the owner of the

⁴⁷⁵ Fox, *King of the Queen City*, 191.

building in question, and despite his awareness, there was no indication that the York family possessed any interest in its pursuit.

While there was not much public activity towards either recognizing the King buildings with a plaque or an all out preservation plan in 1995 and 1996, the various parties attempted to move forward but did not find much public or governmental support. Once again, *Cincinnati Enquirer* journalist Cliff Radel took it upon himself to ramp up public awareness through articles and editorials in the paper in late 1996. In his October 14, 1996, article “King Records Totals Add Up to City History,” he not only reiterated the case for King’s place in the history of Cincinnati, he called its lack of recognition a civic embarrassment. Later in the article, he decided to inquire about the process to designate the building a city landmark. Radel contacted Chris Cain, Cincinnati’s urban conservator, who offered a simple answer.

Write a letter. That’s it. Letters of recommendation can be from anyone. You don’t have to be a citizen of Cincinnati or even live in Ohio. After I get a letter, I research the building. Then I present the request to the Historic Conservation Board. It has nine members and meets every other Monday. The board votes on the building’s qualifications. If it is architecturally, culturally, or historically significant, it passes go. The recommendation then travels to city council. If it receives a passing vote, the building becomes a bona-fide Historic Structure. It even gets an official mention in Cincinnati’s landmark guidebooks. A bronze plaque outside the building costs extra. Prices start at \$300.⁴⁷⁶

Cain further commented on the lack of letters received by his office and estimated that he receives no more than three to four a year in total for any property within the city limits.

⁴⁷⁶ Cliff Radel, “King Records Totals Add Up to City History,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 14, 1996, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

With that, Radel implored his readers to write to Cain and provided a template letter that they could send.

Dear Chris Cain:

The old King Records plant at 1540 Brewster Ave. in Evanston belongs on Cincinnati's list of Historic Properties.

It's famous by the numbers:

* 461 - the records King put on the charts between 1944 and 1970.

* 32 - King's total of No. 1 hits.

* 8 - Rock and Roll Hall of Famers [James Brown, Hank Ballard, Clyde McPhatter, Little Willie John, Jackie Wilson, Bootsy Collins, producer Ralph Bass, founder Syd Nathan] with ties to King.

Yours in landmarks,

Cliff⁴⁷⁷

Within a week on October 21, Radel reported that Chris Cain received over two dozen letters in support of King's landmark application and the Conservation Board placed King on its meeting agenda for later that day. Former King Records promotion manager Shirley Thorpe summed up this sudden movement quite succinctly and poignantly. "Why would the city ever want to recognize that old place? It was a dirty old icehouse in a crummy neighborhood. All they did there was make records . . . that turned into gold."⁴⁷⁸ After reviewing the letters, the Historic Conservation Board voted unanimously to prepare a historic designation report, which Chris Cain estimated he needed ninety days to prepare. Finally, King Records was on the path to an official recognition of its historic significance from its home city.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Cliff Radel, "King Records Plant Touches Souls in City," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 21, 1996, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

The ninety days came and went with no declaration. Cain stated he needed more time to research the building and King Records. However, he did tell the *Cincinnati Enquirer* that there are two options being weighed: a city historic designation or the placement of a city historical marker, but not an explanation of why this was an either/or choice. “Since there’s nothing in the building [now a United Dairy Farmers warehouse] that shows it was a record company, I’m leaning towards a marker.”⁴⁷⁹ This presents an interesting disconnect in the preservation of music spaces at the time, as it appears, incorrectly, that the interior construct exists on the same level as the building’s exterior historical integrity. Is a historic home no longer worthy of preservation if it no longer contains the furniture and personal effects of the original inhabitants? Of course not, so the same standard cannot be applied to King.

Even with that, there was no further reported activity from Cain or the Conservation Board to either designate or even deny the King buildings on Brewster of any historical attribution. To add insult to injury, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which in 1997 inducted King Record founder Syd Nathan and Bootsy Collins, the bassist of James Brown’s 1970s backing band, the JB’s, as a member of Parliament, failed to create a King Records exhibition in its multi-million dollar facility in Cleveland.⁴⁸⁰ Steve Halper, Syd Nathan’s nephew, toured the museum just before the induction ceremony and

⁴⁷⁹ “King Records Update,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 27, 1997, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁴⁸⁰ The Rock Hall inducted Little Willie John a year earlier in 1996.

noted the lack of a King exhibition.⁴⁸¹ Not only was King being disrespected in its hometown, but within a museum dedicated to the history of the very music Nathan and King Records nurtured and promoted from its infancy and with some of its biggest and most influential artists.

Back in 1994, Dwight Tillery stated that one of his primary goals in the campaign to recognize and revitalize the King buildings on Brewster lie in eliciting the involvement of its biggest star, James Brown. After a few attempts to reach and engage Brown, he finally replied and agreed to visit in June 1997. Brown also possessed an interest in both reopening the King Record label and studio in addition to locating his company to Brewster under the newly minted banner of “Ga-Lina-King Records Co.” After the failure of any progress from the Conservation Board and a lack of a King Records exhibit within the Rock Hall, a bright light shone over King and Cincinnati and it emanated from none other one of the biggest stars in the history of modern popular music. But Tillery and the coalition of stakeholders knew that its eggs were all in one basket. They needed the Godfather of Soul to support and invest in the future of King, but all indications revealed Brown was ready to, “Get Up, Get Into It, and Get Involved.” “I’m proud to walk Mr. Brown around Cincinnati and we’re very excited about his proposal to reopen the King Record facility and I look forward to working with him to make it happen,”

⁴⁸¹ Larry Nager, “Rock Stars Come Out at Night,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 7, 1997, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

stated Dwight Tillery.⁴⁸² Brown was on the comeback trail and could think of no other better way on that journey than to reconnect with his past.

In the 1980s James Brown, began a career resurgence thanks in part to his induction into the inaugural class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, a major hit single with “Living in America” from *Rocky IV* motion picture in 1985, and the universal acknowledgement of his influence on that decades’ rising music genre, hip hop.

However, a high profile arrest and conviction in 1988 for failure to stop for police, assault, and for leading the police on a two-state chase found Brown incarcerated. The judge sentenced him to six years in December of that year and Brown earned his release and parole in 1991. Brown immediately hit the road to reclaim his spot as the “Hardest Working Man in Show Business.”⁴⁸³

On Thursday, June 5, 1997, an excited and jubilant Brown arrived via limousine at the King buildings on Brewster. He had not been back since he left his office there when the company closed its Cincinnati location in the early 1970s. Despite over two decades of weathering to the outer shell of the conglomerate of brick buildings, Brown exclaimed, “There she is, there she is” upon his initial sighting.⁴⁸⁴ As he made his way past the crowd and towards his former recording home, Brown declared, “I’m here because I love God and I love Cincinnati and I love King Records, and we are going to

⁴⁸² Sarah Sturmon, “Brown May Revive Music Landmark,” *Cincinnati Post*, June 4, 1997, *Business Insights: Essentials*, accessed January 8, 2019.

⁴⁸³ RJ Smith, *The One: The Life and Music of James Brown* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 336-340.

⁴⁸⁴ Larry Nager, “King Visit Soul-Shocks James Brown,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 6, 1997, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

bring it back.”⁴⁸⁵ However, Brown’s mood quickly changed the moment he crossed the threshold and bore witness to the deteriorated and gutted interior. “They destroyed it. They destroyed it. It’s gone,” exclaimed Brown.⁴⁸⁶ While still shell-shocked, he continued the tour through the interior structures, but did not recognize anything resembling his two decades spent within the buildings. Upon ascending the spiral staircase to the room on the second floor that once housed his office that contained a large desk gifted to him by Syd Nathan, he noted its absence. He remarked, “You think they could have left my desk” to the reporters following him.⁴⁸⁷

With that, Brown descended the stairs, and quickly departed the building. Within minutes of his triumphant arrival, he was back in his limousine driving away from the King Records buildings. *Cincinnati Enquirer* journalist Larry Nager, who accompanied Brown for most of the day noted that Brown expressed his desire to support an effort to reconstruct or commemorate King, “But that [King] is not coming back.”⁴⁸⁸ Kent Butts recounted the many stories and remembrances regarding Brown’s June 1997 visit.

When he came, he thought it would be easier, because he’s James Brown; that’s where he did all of his stuff. The part that I did clue in on was how upset he was. He was upset at the city, but when he actually put his eyes on it, it was just painful to him to see what had become of it.

He did want to try to do something with it, but you still had minutia involved. With where he’s from, not like he was a super business man and could handle all

⁴⁸⁵ Rick Bird, “Brown’s King Records Tour Puts Godfather in a Funk,” *Cincinnati Post*, June 6, 1997, accessed January 8, 2019, *Business Insights: Essentials*.

⁴⁸⁶ Nager “King Visit Soul-Shocks James Brown.”

⁴⁸⁷ Bird, “Brown’s King Records Tour Puts Godfather in a Funk.”

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., “King Visit Soul-Shocks James Brown.”

that, but he thought, from my perspective and others, he just thought when he came, he would open the door to get whoever was involved, and he would be the catalyst. When that wasn't the situation, he left very disappointed.⁴⁸⁹

For all intents and purposes, when Brown departed the King buildings, he also left the King Records Museum Project preservation effort. In August 1997, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported on Brown's interest in purchasing real estate in the city, however, the paper did not confirm his interest or lack thereof in the Brewster Avenue properties.⁴⁹⁰ Brown was so disillusioned and heartbroken that he canceled his appearance at a Dwight Tillery fundraiser in September at the last minute and performed in Cancun, Mexico instead.⁴⁹¹

With Brown's withdrawal from the King Records Museum Project preservation efforts, the campaign fizzled out. Admittedly, Tillery put all his eggs in the James Brown basket and they all broke when Brown crossed the threshold back onto Brewster Avenue. Tillery was not wrong to put so much on the line, as there really had not been much progress other than the formation of a loose coalition of stakeholders and some discussions of future plans. The overall ideas raised by Tillery, King Records Museum Project Committee, the Evanston Community Council, and others to turn King into both a museum celebrating the past and a community center serving the present remains both correct and somewhat ahead of its time. But, the campaign needed a boost, like King, it

⁴⁸⁹ Kent Butts interview with author.

⁴⁹⁰ "Seen Around Town," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 6, 1997, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁴⁹¹ "Brown Out; Locals In," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 5, 1997, accessed December 20, 2018, newspapers.com.

needed a star or a dynamic leader like Syd Nathan to insure its future. Brown's stardom still needed rehabilitation and he did not possess the characteristics to become "The Hardest Working Man in Historic Preservation."

The 1990s in Cincinnati closed with no progress on even placing a plaque on the right-of-way on Brewster, even though Tillery claimed it would be easy to do. Also, there was no collective demand from either the citizens or the politicians to move the needle forward and there was not even a display or other form of commemoration by the city or its historic societies after Brown left. The only recognition appeared in the form of a special exhibit at a nightclub, Jefferson Hall, in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in the form of some photos and album covers.⁴⁹² The millennium ended with King Records only slightly more in the mind space of Cincinnatians, but without any real momentum and a few seeds planted for any hope of an acknowledgement. King Records was once again dead.

There's A New Day Tomorrow: A New Millennium, A New King Campaign

There is a new day tomorrow, A new day to dream
And a new sun above way up there...
There is a long way to travel, A long road ahead
To the castles we build in the air
James Widener, "There's A New Day Tomorrow," 1946.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹² "Homage to King Records," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 17, 1999, newspapers.com, accessed December 20, 2018.

⁴⁹³ Jimmie Widener, "There's a New Day Tomorrow," written by Travis and Hensley, King 536A, May 1946, author's collection.

The April 2001 riots rocked Cincinnati leaders and their assumptions about the city, its need for racial harmony, and its future. Once the protests died down following police shooting and death of Timothy Thomas, African American community leaders called for boycott of many city functions, including the *Taste of Cincinnati* festival in May 2001. In addition to asking that Cincinnatians not attend the city-sponsored event, the leaders of the protest put pressure on many of the performers scheduled to play. As a result of the boycott, both the Isley Brothers and Midnight Star canceled their appearances at the festival after receiving an outpouring of calls and letters. Reverend Damon Lynch III, one of the leaders of the boycott, noted, “The Isleys told me they had received a multitude of calls from family and friends that grew up with them in Lincoln Heights who told them this is not a time for celebration but a time to stand up for the community in protest.”⁴⁹⁴ With the loss of two main stage acts, the festival and city government needed to find a suitable replacement that both possessed the same prestige and connections to Cincinnatians as did the Isley Brothers and Midnight Star. The festival organizers turned to none other than the “Godfather of Soul,” James Brown, who put Cincinnati on the musical map a few decades earlier with the music he recorded at King Records in Evanston.

James Brown accepted Mayor Charlie Luken’s invitation to not only headline the *Taste of Cincinnati* festival, but to attempt to use his presence and history as a social advocate to begin to heal the divide. While a contingent of protesters showed up to the

⁴⁹⁴ Larry Nager and Howard Wilkerson, “‘Godfather’ replaces Isleys at Taste,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 25, 2001, accessed February 4, 2019, newspapers.com

concert, many holding signs and wooden puppets, Brown used the stage as a pulpit. Brown stated, “I came here for the ones that were protesting and the ones that weren’t protesting. I came for all of them. I just came because the city’s threatened to be hurt and I want to be one of the people that helps stop it from being hurt.”⁴⁹⁵ While one cannot ascribe Brown’s appearance or his words to any progress in the strife between the boycotters and the city, it was clear that there was still much to be done to not only heal the divide, but to both progress and celebrate the contributions to the city from its minority communities.

After a tough first two years in office, Cincinnati Councilman John Cranley and his staff searched for ways to highlight and celebrate the city’s progress in race relations and economic disparity. A year after Councilman Cranley’s impromptu trip to Memphis with Ruther, he led a formal delegation of city council members including Alicia Reece and Laketa Cole to Memphis to visit of the same sites as before with the addition to the newly opened Stax Museum of American Soul. Cranley recalls, “There were many dark chapters in the history of race relations in Cincinnati that were not good, but this [King Records] is one of the good things that was a positive . . . So, it became clear to me that King should be preserved the way Sun Records had been retrofitted.”⁴⁹⁶ After the two Memphis trips Cranley, Elliott Ruther, and other city council members witnessed how Memphis now embraced and marketed its cultural and musical heritage, the group

⁴⁹⁵ Larry Nager, “Brown Says He Appeared for Everyone,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 27, 2001, newspapers.com, accessed February 4, 2019.

⁴⁹⁶ John Cranley interview with author.

decided to explore how best to do something similar to King's legacy and possibly with the original buildings.

Some efforts to help recognize and spread the legacy of King Records through the Cincinnati populace began in earnest at the dawn of the new millennium. Noteworthy progress include the 2002 Cammy Awards King Records multi-artist tribute and the release of the *Hidden Treasures* album featuring artists such as Peter Frampton, the Blessed Union of Souls, Bootsy Collins, Over the Rhine, and thirteen other artists recording King Records material. Rock legend Frampton remarked that, "King Records was all about diversity and inclusion, and I wanted to be part of something that might help bring people together and hopefully the country and the world."⁴⁹⁷ The Cammy Awards also featured the awarding of Lifetime Achievement Awards to several King legends including Syd Nathan, James Brown, Lonnie Mack, Otis Williams, Bootsy and Catfish Collins, Charles Spurling, and Philip Paul. The organizers of the award show invited Terry Stewart, the President and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland to introduce and to speak about several of the lifetime award winners and the impact of the King Records legacy.⁴⁹⁸ At the same time of the CD release and the Cammy Awards, a new movement to landmark the King Records building as part of Ohio's bicentennial began in earnest.

⁴⁹⁷ "Peter Frampton Hopes CD Will Ease Racial Division," *The Marion Star*, October 17, 2002, accessed February 12, 2019, newspapers.com.

⁴⁹⁸ Neal Mayerson, "Cincinnati Showed Hip Roots with 'Legacy,'" *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 23, 2002, accessed February 12, 2019, newspapers.com.

The Ohio Bicentennial Commission announced its plans to install over two-hundred markers on historically significant buildings and sites throughout the state, and revealed to *Cincinnati Enquirer* journalist and King advocate, Cliff Radel, its interest in placing one on the Brewster buildings. However, it also noted its requirement that the building owners Steve Dohme, who owned 1540 Brewster, and the York family, who owned 1536 Brewster, must also agree to the designation and placement. Dohme stated, “If there is something we can do to be a good neighbor and it doesn’t totally shoot our foot off, I’m not opposed . . . Graffiti boys come here a lot” and he hoped that maybe this marker will if nothing else, “facilitate the police watching the place.”⁴⁹⁹ Additionally, if awarded, the plaque must be financed by outside funds, as the state did not pay the approximately \$1,500 cost to create and erect the marker. While all indication that this state-level recognition was all but a fait accompli, it suddenly died on the vine a few months later, probably because of the requirement of owner support and that support disappearing for some unknown reason from Dohme and/or the Yorks.

With the end of the state’s Bicentennial recognition, Councilman John Cranley stepped in and collaborated with his fellow council members and Terry Stewart of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. They began an earnest pursuit of recognition by the City of Cincinnati and/or the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Councilman Cranley outlined a series of different ways to celebrate the King Records legacy and the historic building. In addition to a marker, Cranley proposed a city-owned billboard between the building and

⁴⁹⁹ Cliff Radel, “The Queen City’s King: A Marker for a Vinyl Destination,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 1, 2002, accessed February 5, 2019, newspapers.com.

Interstate 71, an annual King Records themed concert or festival, and an exhibit. Cranley did announce his intention to form a committee with fellow council members Alicia Reece and Jim Tarbell. But he did not elaborate on whether the King Records exhibit was a permanent or traveling installation through various public spaces throughout Cincinnati. He estimated the total cost of the project at around \$400,000, most of which he hoped to raise the majority of from private donations.⁵⁰⁰ Additionally, after his trip to Memphis, Councilman Cranley with Mayor Charlie Luken also began exploring the creation of an entertainment and tourist district on Main Street in the Over-the-Rhine section modeled after the revitalization of Beale Street project begun in 1982 under the direction of John A. Elkington, a real estate developer, whom they approached about the Over-the-Rhine project.

While progress on Councilman Cranley's King Records vision progressed slowly, there were small steps forward. City officials engaged a real estate agent to reach out to the York family and Steve Dohme with inquiries about a city or private purchase of the King buildings or other way to partner to preserve and interpret the King legacy. "We reached out to the owners to try and figure out options and they were not interested in any kind of sale price. Always putting down the approach. They did not want the attention it might draw, such as vandals and that kind of thing," recalls Elliott Ruther.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ Cliff Radel, "King Records: Music Lovers Planning a Real Tribute," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 18, 2003, accessed November 13, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁵⁰¹ Elliott Ruther interview with author.

At the same time as the concerted effort and approach to the King Records property owners, an exhibit celebrating soul music in Cincinnati entitled “A Thousand Tears Too Late: A History of Cincinnati Soul,” opened at the Contemporary Art Center in October 2005. While the exhibit focused on the soul music history and culture in Cincinnati as a whole, it centered on King Records and more specifically, “The Godfather of Soul,” James Brown. The exhibit ran for three months before closing on January 1, 2006, less than twelve-months later, James Brown passed away. Though Brown most famously abandoned his most public approach to revive the King buildings and its legacy a few years earlier, he still always harbored the desire to accomplish that goal. He stated in his desire to revive King Records in his 2005 autobiography.

. . . my plan is to start a new record company, on the order of King Records, in a city [Cincinnati] not primarily known for its music, away from the big honchos... I’d record my new music and find the young talent around and capture what is really going down today, in the ghettos, in those pockets that the mass market big boys haven’t as yet figured out how to turn the latest T-shirt or brand of soft drink. If the industry is really crying out for a savior, brothers and sisters, here I am! With Mr. Bobbit by my side to handle the finances, and me in the studio, we’d get it right and inject some real energy and meaning into the world of music in these new times. We’d be the first mom-and-pop record company of the twenty-first century!⁵⁰²

By the time of Brown’s passing, neither he nor the City of Cincinnati succeeded in any kind of permanent memorialization or revitalization of the King Records legacy. The next two years proved to be different.

⁵⁰² James Brown, *I Feel Good: A Memoir of a Life in Soul* (New York: NAL Hardcover, 2005), page 261.

The First Sign of Love: A Marker and a Path Forward

The first sign of love
 We will make a promise in our hearts
 That we will never, never part
 That is the first sign of love
 Otis Williams and the Charms, "The First Sign of Love," 1960.⁵⁰³

The Cincinnati Blues Society produced a successful King Records themed blues festival in August 2007 that featured over fifty artists. Each artist performed not only blues repertoire, but many featured songs from the King Records catalog. Additionally, King Records alumni performed. Otis Williams sang various hits from the Charms, Philip Paul played drums with a King Records tribute band, and Piney Brown performed on the first night at a show emceed by former JB's bassist, Bootsy Collins. For Paul, like for many King alumni, this event felt like the commencement of a new beginning in the effort to preserve and disseminate the King Records history and legacy. He stated, "The idea of this whole project releases a lot of tension and anxiety in me. I've been concerned about this, that when I pass this will be forgotten, because there aren't many of us left. I'm talking about the musicians that played behind the groups. They are not well known."⁵⁰⁴ The event attracted nearly 20,000 attendees over its two-day run. A week later WVXU-FM broadcasted its four-hour documentary entitled "King Records: Cincinnati Legacy" on the history and impact of King Records and its artists. The

⁵⁰³ Otis Williams and the Charms, "The First Sign of Love," by Ken Wood, recorded on August 2, 1960, King 45-5389, 45 rpm.

⁵⁰⁴ Rick Bird, "Blues Fest Salutes King Records and Its Artists," *The Cincinnati Post*, August 2, 2007, accessed January 8, 2019, <http://bi.galegroup.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu>.

program featured interviews with Otis Williams, Philip Paul with historians and journalists Darren Blase, Lee Hay, Randy McNutt, and Larry Nager, amongst others. Additionally, the radio documentary discussed the “efforts to preserve the music and Brewster Avenue building.”⁵⁰⁵ By the time it aired two organizations began to form to address the preservation of the buildings on Brewster, the Cincinnati USA Musical Heritage Foundation and King Studios through the Community Building Initiative at neighboring Xavier University.

Bootsy and Patti Collins formed the Cincinnati USA Musical Heritage Foundation with Darren Blase, Chris Burgan, Raymond Buse, Russell Driver, Marvin Hawkins, Sean Rugless, and Elliott Ruther as its first board members. “The mission of the Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation serves to elevate the region's rich music heritage and the contributions of the past, present, and future music community through preservation, education and celebration.”⁵⁰⁶ The members viewed the King Records story as a similar driver for tourism and art revitalization that they observed in Memphis with Stax and Sun and in Detroit with Motown. Darren Blase noted, “There’s value in knowing your history. Let’s recognize it and do something instead of ignoring it. And use it to our advantage.”⁵⁰⁷ One of the foundation’s first efforts resulted in a “Tribute to James Brown” concert held at the Madison Theater, a twelve-hundred seat venue in neighboring

⁵⁰⁵ “King Records’ History on WVMX,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 7, 2007, accessed February 20, 2019, newspapers.com.

⁵⁰⁶ “About Us,” Cincinnati USA Musical Heritage, website, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://cincinnati-usa-musical-heritage-foundation.bigcartel.com/about-us>.

⁵⁰⁷ Chris Varias, “Foundation Pays Tribute to King,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 20, 2007, accessed February 20, 2019, newspapers.com.

Covington, Kentucky, on December 22, 2007. Performances and appearances included a reunion of the JB's with Clyde Stubblefield, Jabo Starks, Fred Thomas, Bootsy and Catfish Collins, Public Enemy leader Chuck D., actor and comedian Tommy Davidson, Afrika Bambaataa, Buckethead, and James Brown's Soul Generals, amongst many others.

Xavier University's Community Building Institute began to form King Studios in partnership with the Evanston Community Council. Charles Lester in his article "They've Taken It All Away: The Only Thing Here Is Me," summarizes this organization's 2009 founding and its attention to the King Records legacy but not on the original buildings on Brewster. Rather the organization focused on building a new interpretative center a few blocks away from the still-standing King Records Buildings on Montgomery Avenue. King Studios was to "provide an educational facility and museum dedicated to the local heritage of King Records" and Lester noted its mission statement from the Xavier University-housed website.⁵⁰⁸

Inspired by the legacy of historic King Records and fueled by the academic investment and economic development of nearby Xavier University, this one-of-a-kind facility will be located in Cincinnati's Evanston community, in the heart of the Montgomery business district. It will feature the dynamic integration of music and arts education, entrepreneurial training, and cultural history all under one roof.⁵⁰⁹

Interestingly, prior to Xavier's formation of King Studios, the University acquired a "Right of First Refusal to Purchase" the buildings and property from Dynamic

⁵⁰⁸ Charles Lester, "They've Taken It All Away. The Only Thing Here Is Me," *The Public Historian*, 39, No.2, (May 2017): 71.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 71-72, Lester located this statement at <http://www.xavier.edu/communitybuilding/kingstudios/about.cfm>.

Industries throughout Cincinnati. Some of the parcels listed in the contract included those Dynamic Industries properties on Brewster that basically enveloped and surrounded the King buildings owned by the York family and Steve Dohme and were across the street from Xavier's Alumni Center. The document filed with the Hamilton County Records Office on July 3, 2008, Xavier University agreed to pay \$450,000 to Dynamic Industries over three installments.⁵¹⁰ Despite its ability to control the majority of the Brewster block, there is no evidence of any discussions or plans to focus on that location for its King Records Experiential Learning Center.

The year 2008 witnessed some positive forward progress on the commemoration and education about King Records, its sixty-fifth anniversary, and its enduring legacy. An exhibition of King artifacts opened in August at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County under the direction of Brian Powers. Performances at its opening included the Syd Nathanists, which featured Phillip Paul, former Midnighter Wesley Hargrove, Elliott Ruther, Marvin Hawkins, and others. A month later, Councilman John Cranley filed a motion on September 29, 2008, with the City of Cincinnati Council that not only it will the city officially recognize and celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of King Records, but it will support an effort of educational outreach and the installation of a marker on the public right of way on Brewster outside of the King Building from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

⁵¹⁰ "Right of First Refusal to Purchase" between Dynamic Industries and Xavier University, July 2, 2008, submitted to and filed by the Hamilton County Records Office on July 3, 2008.

The City Council voted unanimously to accept Councilman Cranley's motion two weeks later. The motion covered several issues and initiatives to help properly recognize the King Records legacy in Cincinnati, though the acquisition of the buildings were absent in the motion. That omission did not mean that efforts were not under way and the behind the scenes approaches to the owner continued. Despite the building not being a part of the accepted motion, it did make other positive leaps forward. The City recognized its efforts included a robust partnership with several groups including "the Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the CEA's [Cincinnati Entertainment Awards / Citybeat], Cincinnati State Technical & Community College, and Xavier University Community Building Institute & Evanston Community Council."⁵¹¹

In addition to laying out King's and its artists' and employees' place in the history of various genres of music, the motion also put several concrete efforts into effect for the label's commemoration and educational outreach. First it authorized and funded the placement of a marker from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

We further move that the City of Cincinnati fund up to \$10,000 for the installation of a King Records historic marker on public property outside the former King Records site located at 1540 Brewster Avenue in time to be unveiled on Sunday, November 23, and for the remaining funds to be used by the CEA's to book a King Records artist performance at the Cincinnati Entertainment Awards (CEA's).⁵¹²

⁵¹¹ Councilman John Cranley's September 29, 2008, Motion 200801198, <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/council/meeting-agendas-minutes/>, accessed August 17, 2018.

⁵¹² Ibid.

In addition to King Records-themed presentations and exhibitions, the motion also attempted to leverage its momentum to develop a King Records class and to facilitate dialogues with the organizations listed. It revealed an agreement in place amongst them to continue to develop ways to celebrate and commemorate the King Records history and legacy.

We further move that the City of Cincinnati's partnership with the Rock Hall leverage a broad partnership of additional Cincinnati institutions including Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, who will provide in-kind support and host location for King Records class / lecture to be developed with the Rock Hall, Xavier University Community Building Institute and Evanston Community Council who will provide an Evanston neighborhood reception with an estimated value of \$5,000 to discuss their plans of a King Records Center, and the Cincinnati Entertainment Awards (CEA's / Citybeat) will host a King Records artist performance and presentation, valued at over \$35,000 in promotional and programming expenses, at the annual Cincinnati music awards."⁵¹³

The City drew its \$10,000 commitment from funds unallocated in the 2004 Capital Arts Fund. Upon its passing, Jim Engelhardt, Syd Nathan's grandson, declared, "'About time!' My grandfather would growl as he chewed on a cigar."⁵¹⁴ With that, the planning began for a celebration and dedication to be held on November 23, 2008.

November 23, 2008, greeted Cincinnati with a balmy fifty-degree partly cloudy day; perfect early winter weather for a series of indoor and outdoor festivities throughout the Queen City and its main event on Brewster Avenue. Over two hundred people from all walks of life and various King Records backgrounds and enthusiasm gathered in front

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Cliff Radcliff, "City to Buy Historic Marker for King Records," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 10, 2008, page 21, newspapers.com, accessed February 20, 2019.

of the former King buildings to celebrate its legacy and unveil a marker from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. By 2008, the Rock Hall had placed fewer than ten markers throughout the United States, which included ones at the infamous crossroads in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa, and the Whisky-a-Go-Go in Los Angeles, California. Led by Bootsy Collins and Rock Hall President Terry Stewart, the newly placed marker once revealed summed up the history and impact of the record company and its artists and employees in about sixty words.

King Records: The King of Them All

From 1943 - 1971 King Records forever changed American music. Owner Syd Nathan gave the world Bluegrass, R&B, Rock & Roll, Doo Top, Country, Soul and Funk. With stars from James Brown to the Stanley Brothers, and its innovative, integrated business model, Cincinnati's King Records revolutionized the music industry.⁵¹⁵

It took less than half the words to perfectly summarize King Record's legacy. Not given to hyperbole, Stewart simply stated, "There was never a more important place in the world musically, culturally, or historically than this piece of real estate. None other."⁵¹⁶

Elliott Ruther recalls that Terry Stewart, "Warned the audience to not tear down the building . . . he was speaking to what he was picking up that day. Here they were, I mean somebody got up on stage and suggested that we tear down the building and sell each brick as a fundraiser for the new spot [on Montgomery]."⁵¹⁷ Ruther further reflects, "I have often wondered at times why there always seems to be some kind of street fight

⁵¹⁵ King Records Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Marker, Brewster Avenue, Cincinnati, OH, from photo taken by author on August 9, 2018.

⁵¹⁶ "King of Local Music: Legendary Studio Honored," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 10, 2008, accessed December 21, 2018, newspapers.com.

⁵¹⁷ Elliott Ruther interview with author August 9, 2018.

connected to King . . . it just seems to be present. There was a bit of a negative response that connected to the Montgomery effort about saving the building with the announcement that day.”⁵¹⁸ An either / or choice felt rather premature, as neither efforts possessed funding nor infrastructure to position itself as the true choice. Both possessed passion and attributes to indicate an eventual successful interpretation of the King Records legacy, but ultimately with the original site still standing, every effort needed to be expended on its salvage. An interpretative center a few block away without the building would always have to overcome the question on why the building was ‘allowed’ to perish.

When Councilman John Cranley, who led the charge and initiative to save and celebrate the King Records buildings and its legacy, also tried to put down any discussion of tearing the building down. He vowed to introduce legislation immediately to both landmark and preserve the buildings. Unlike a National Register of Historic Places designation, the City of Cincinnati’s landmark designation prevents any future confrontation with a wrecking ball. Upon reflection of this time, John Cranley recalled, “The bottom line is that the place where Elvis and the Million Dollar Quartet performed [Sun Records in Memphis] is sacred space and the place where James Brown performed in Evanston is sacred space and also cannot be replicated.”⁵¹⁹

Following the dedication ceremony, the various organizations and the city government sponsored several other events. Attendees heard about the vision for a

⁵¹⁸ Elliott Ruther interview with author August 9, 2018.

⁵¹⁹ John Cranley interview with author, August 9, 2018.

Montgomery Avenue King Records Experiential Learning Center three blocks away from the King Records buildings at the Xavier University Community Building Institute.

Xavier with Cincinnati USA Music Heritage organized a reception and reunion for over fifty King Records alumni culled from its staff and artist roster. The Cincinnati Entertainment Awards changed the format of its annual awards show to a King Records tribute concert that featured Ralph Stanley and a JBs reunion featuring Bootsy Collins in tribute to their former employer and King Records cornerstone, James Brown, in the recently reopened and refurbished Emery Theater.

As he promised at the lectern at the dedication ceremony, Councilman John Cranley introduced and passed a motion to move towards a landmark status for the King Records complex, though the addresses in the motion differ than those on city's plat maps. The motion passed with seven additional council members signing it on November 26, 2008, a mere three days later. Interestingly, the property addresses alluded to in the motion are not the proper addresses for the western King buildings owned by the York family that once housed King's recording studio and James Brown's office.

We Move that the city take all necessary steps to preserve and protect the original King Records facility located at 1540, 1541, 1542, and 1543 Brewster Avenue in the Evanston Community.

We Move that the city bring to City Council legislation that will place a local historical designation on the properties at 1540, 1541, 1542, and 1543 Brewster thus protecting these properties from demolition.

We Further Move that the City request the Cincinnati Historical Conservation Office to prepare and execute a local designation landmark study on the properties located at 1540, 1541, 1542, and 1543 Brewster Avenue. The purpose

of this study will be to have the Original King Records facility deemed as a local historical landmark.⁵²⁰

Unfortunately the motion did not lead to any immediate progress towards an official landmark designation, that took another seven years to accomplish. One of the primary reasons for this motion progressing no further than it did in late November lie in Councilman John Cranley's term concluding at the end of December. The City of Cincinnati possesses term limits for its elected government officials, and Cranley reached his term limit. Any momentum gained from the marker dedication and subsequent motion to progress towards landmarking the King Records buildings all but evaporated the day Cranley left City Hall for a private law practice. "We had all that momentum and candidly what happened was I was term limited out of city council and left and nobody else cared," recalled Cranley.⁵²¹ Elliott Ruther further elaborated: "Then after John left, after the legislation passed, nobody picked it up in the city. There was a change in the urban conservator for the city and nobody picked up the ball from any elected official."⁵²² Despite forward progress a few events in 2009, helped push forward the King story and the City's understanding of its musical and cultural heritage.

The Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation expanded its efforts from the King building to another historic recording studio within Cincinnati's city limits, Herzog Studio. Bucky Herzog, an engineer for WLW radio, opened a recording facility in 1945

⁵²⁰ City of Cincinnati Motion, 200801440, November 26, 2008, cincinnati-oh.gov, accessed August 7, 2018.

⁵²¹ John Cranley interview with author.

⁵²² Elliott Ruther interview with author

on the second floor of the 811 Race Street office building. While only in operation for around a decade, Herzog recorded seminal sides in American popular music history. In addition to many early R&B sides with King Records before Nathan opened his own facility, Bucky Herzog recorded ground-breaking and popular sides by Hank Williams and Flatt and Scruggs.⁵²³ Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation and other organizations successfully raised the funds needed to fabricate and place a marker in front of the 811 Race Street building on the sidewalk. On November 22, 2009, the foundation unveiled a two-sided marker that stated the following on the marker facing east.

Herzog Studio (1945 - 1955)

Earl “Bucky” Herzog, a WLW radio engineer, opened Cincinnati’s first commercial recording studio with his brother Charles on the second floor of 811 Race Street in 1945. Working with artists from Syd Nathan’s King Records, WLW radio musicians, and visiting performers. Herzog recorded Country before Nashville. Here, landmark sessions by Flatt & Scruggs, Bull Moose Jackson, the Delmore Brothers, Patti Page, and Hank Williams were recorded.⁵²⁴

The marker facing west memorializes the Hank Williams sessions.

Hank Williams at Herzog

On December 22, 1948, Hank Williams came to the Herzog studio to record with WLW’s Pleasant Valley Boys, the most in demand session musicians in Country music. They cut “Lovesick Blues” which launched Hank’s career into superstardom and led to his invitation to join the Grand Ole Opry. After a second session on August 30, 1949, eight Hank Williams classics were recorded at Herzog, including “I’m So Lonesome, I Could Cry.”⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Some of the landmark sides recorded at Herzog include Hank Williams’ “Lovesick Blues,” “My Bucket’s Got a Hole in It” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” Flatt & Scruggs’ “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” Delmore Brothers’ “Freight Train Boogie,” Bullmoose Jackson’s “The Honeydripper,” and several sides by Patti Page, Grandpa Jones, Moon Mullican, and Red Foley.

⁵²⁴ Herzog Studio marker, located at 811 Race Street, Cincinnati. Text from photo from author’s collection taken September 23, 2017.

⁵²⁵ Hank Williams at Herzog marker, located at 811 Race Street, Cincinnati. Text from photo from author’s collection taken September 23, 2017.

Additionally, the 811 Race Street building's ownership leased the second floor space that formerly housed Herzog Studios to the Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation for its use, preservation, and interpretation.

Finally the first decade of the new millennium witnessed the release of two books focused on King Records. The first was Jon Hartley Fox's *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records* in the September, a few months after the marker dedication. Arcadia Press release Randy McNutt's *King Records of Cincinnati*, a 128-page photo essay. Both books achieved widespread critical acclaim and helped to further cement King's long overlooked place in the annals of musical and cultural history.

Within a few months of the Rock Hall plaque dedication, the landmark study motion in City Council, and John Cranley's departure from City Hall, the York family finally decided to sell the cluster of buildings on the western end of Brewster that once housed much of King Records operation. Although the city made several approaches before that, the York family sold the former King buildings to none other than Dynamic Industries, who already controlled much of real estate on the Brewster block. The Hamilton County Auditor recorded the sale of 1536 Brewster on June 9, 2009, from Jewel York to Dynamic Industries, Inc. for \$225,000.⁵²⁶ Whether that Brewster acquisition became subject to Xavier University's Right of First Refusal remains unknown. Dynamic Industries possessed full awareness of the Rock Hall marker and the

⁵²⁶ 1536 Brewster Avenue Property Report, Parcel 059-00002-0093-00, Hamilton County Auditor's Office, https://wedge1.hcauditor.org/view/re/0590002009300/2018/print_report, accessed December 22, 2018.

landmark motion when it acquired 1536 Brewster Avenue. However, Dynamic Industries' primary purpose of acquisition lie in its desire for the open space for its trucks to park and turn around in its property just north of the King buildings. The company expressed no interest in rehabilitating the King buildings nor making it available for the public or any kind of interpretation. Instead, like its previous owners, the York family, Dynamic Industries allowed the buildings to languish and deteriorate further while the City of Cincinnati remained silent.

Efforts by various groups for the memorialization of King Records took many directions and locations throughout Cincinnati often at odds with each other and ultimately confusing those who possessed an interest in King Records. But each of those efforts lacked major funding and the power of government intervention and muscle that it possessed during the Cranley era in the Cincinnati City Council. It is often said that elections have consequences. That almost proverb-level mantra never exhibited more veracity for the fate of the King Records buildings than the Cincinnati mayoral race in 2013. The 2013 election pitted presumptive front-runner Roxanne Qualls, who served as mayor from 1993 through 1999, against former Cincinnati City Councilman and King Records champion, John Cranley.

Guess Who: The Return of John Cranley

Tell you just how grand you are
 And just how much he cares
 I know someone who loves you
 Guess who, guess who...
 Ivory Joe Hunter, "Guess Who," 1949.⁵²⁷

On December 1, 2013, the City of Cincinnati swore in its sixty-ninth mayor, former city councilman, John Joseph Cranley. He received almost fifty-eight percent of the votes cast. Almost five years elapsed since he served in any government capacity. Cranley spent the time between council and the mayor's office as a private practice attorney largely focused on real estate law. Though the issue of the King Records building never served as an issue or platform plank for either mayoral candidate, Cranley returned to the cause soon after his inauguration.

Similar to an effort while he served in the council, Cranley asked real estate agents and professionals to reach out to Dynamic Industries, owners of 1536 Brewster, and Steve Dohme, owner of 1540 Brewster, to seek some kind of private purchase. Once in hand, he promised an effort to seek city support for the purchase. Dynamic did not oppose the idea of selling buildings in the Brewster complex or at least selling an option to purchase them through a first refusal deal, as it had entered into a similar arrangement with Xavier University years earlier before it acquired a part of the King Records

⁵²⁷ Ivory Joe Hunter, "Guess Who" by Mrs. Ivory Joe Hunter, recorded on February 28, 1949, King 4306AA, 45 rpm.

complex from the York family. John Cranley recalled his effort to initiate the purchase of 1536 Brewster from Dynamic Industries in the early days of his mayoral term.

When I got elected mayor, I said we are going to get this done come hell or high water. We, candidly, I had a lot of - I was a real estate developer briefly, I was also a real estate attorney, so I knew a lot of people in the real estate industry. So, I told several people - I said don't tie it back to the city, but see if you could get a contract. You have to put the money down, I can't promise you anything unless I get city council to approve it.

But if you get an option to buy it, I'll go to the council and work to get the votes to. You have to take it on faith, nothing with a signature. You may lose your deposit if I am wrong. But I had several people call to call him [the owner of Dynamic Industries], but he would not have any reason to tie it to me and he just refused to return their phone calls.⁵²⁸

This effort went on for approximately the first two years of Cranley's first term in office with no indications of any interest or progress toward the sale by Dynamic Industries. At a kick off event for the second annual King Records month celebration in 2014, Mayor Cranley promised to work with Xavier, the Evanston Community, and other organizations to preserve King's history and insure Cincinnatians learned about it. But he also remained steadfast in the importance of acquiring the original site.

I still believe and still remain committed, like the original Sun Record studio in Memphis, that we get the actual building...this is sacred space....I think we have to get the building where James Brown, and Philip [Paul], and Otis [Williams] recorded. I look forward to working with you all on that.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁸ John Cranley interview with author, August 10, 2018.

⁵²⁹ "King Records Month Kick Off, September 3, 2014," video, authors collection.

Chris Schadler from Xavier University's Community Building Institute and its King Studios initiative followed Mayor Cranley. He outlined his organization's efforts to build a King Studios Experiential Learning Center on Montgomery Road by 2018 and other preservation of King Records materials and educational outreach initiatives. However, Schadler offered no announcement or indication of any effort or focus in acquiring, let alone offering support for the preservation of the original site.⁵³⁰ Kent Butts, son of Otis Williams and then Vice President of King Studios, deviated from his prepared remarks which highlighted various events throughout the month, and reminded the audience of the importance of the original site. He stated simply, "We want to get that building but we also want to build some new things at the same time."⁵³¹ Councilman Wendell Young followed and further underscored Mayor Cranley's and Kent Butts' commitment to the original building.

King Records certainly belongs on that National Register [of Historic Places]. It certainly deserves to have a building worthy of its heritage. But equally as important, it should still be able to serve as a beacon to what people can do when they pull together regardless of race, regardless of color, and regardless of ethnic background.⁵³²

The press conference concluded with Otis Williams and Kent Butts presenting Mayor Cranley with an honorary designation as a member of this group the Charms.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid.

Williams emphatically stated something both he and the Mayor agreed upon. “We are going to get that building!”⁵³³

In 2015, Elliott Ruther with Cincinnati USA Music Foundation and Margo Warminski from Cincinnati Preservation presented an application to the city’s Historic Conservation Board to designate the King buildings as a historic city landmark. The Bootsie Collins Foundation also endorsed the landmark application. Around the same time as the submission of the landmark application and its subsequent unanimous approval by the Historic Conservation Board in July, Dynamic Industries submitted a demolition permit application. Dynamic and its attorney, Tim Burke, who also served as the Hamilton County chairman of the Democratic Party at the time, argued against a landmark designation.

There is nothing in this building today that reflects what it is was when it was a record studio. The cost of bringing this building back would be enormous. It is equally important to recognize you don’t mess with people’s private property rights without extreme care. That hasn’t been done here.⁵³⁴

Burke’s argument was specious at best. A landmark designation focuses structural and historic integrity of the building and next to nothing regarding the furniture and equipment contained within its four walls. In fact, a major push for historic landmarking, even in 2015, lie in ‘adaptive reuse,’ which also falls counter to his position. However, he was correct that private property owners rights must be respected, but not in so much

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Chris Wetterick, “Fight over Cincinnati’s Former King Records Building Has Big Political Implications,” *Cincinnati Business Courier*, July 28, 2015, <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/blog/2015/07/fight-over-former-king-records-building-has-big.html>, accessed October 31, 2017.

as the applicants and at the time, the Historic Conservation Board applied and considered in its decision to seek and approve it.

After the unanimous approval for King's landmark status by the Historic Conservation Board, the Cincinnati Planning Commission also unanimously approved it in August. Once again, Tim Burke on behalf of his client Dynamic Industries offered a similar argument against the landmarking but this time threatened legal action to preserve his client's 'constitutional right' to raze the buildings.

The third and final step in the landmarking of the King buildings owned by Dynamic Industries resided with the Cincinnati City Council, who several years earlier in 2008 after the dedication of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame marker and a year prior to Dynamic Industries purchase of the buildings in question, passed a motion attesting to its commitment to preserve the historic King Records structures. The council met on October 7 to discuss on vote on Ordinance 319. Mayor John Cranley made sure to enter into the record the contested timeline of the application submitted to landmark the King Records buildings and Dynamic's submission for a demolition permit. He stated that the city's position continues to focus on outreach to Dynamic Industries to seek an equitable settlement to the matter through the purchase of the King Records buildings in its possession.

It was only after Cincinnati Music USA made a formal application to the Historic Conservation Board that the owner [Dynamic Industries] made a demolition permit. Only after! And following through on a commitment that was made in 2008 was a move made to demolition.

In fact, the owner had been sitting on the building with no activity essentially since 2009, I believe. So for the last six years with no activity and no plans to demolish the building. It was only after an application was made for historic designation that a demolition permit was issued. So I don't think we are reacting . . . we are only following through on a commitment prior to the current owner's ownership. Understanding the sequence of that is important.⁵³⁵

Upon the completion of Mayor Cranley's summation, the Cincinnati City Council voted unanimously in favor of designating the King buildings a city landmark. In its Emergency Ordinance, the city outlined its reasoning for its position and need for immediate action.

Section 7. That this ordinance shall be an emergency measure necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health, safety and general welfare and shall, subject to the terms of Article II, Section 6 of the Charter, be effective immediately.

The reason for the emergency is to ensure that any alterations to, or demolitions of, the King Records Complex be reviewed by the Historic Conservation Board pursuant to Cincinnati Municipal Code Charter 1435, "Historic Preservation," which is imminently necessary to preserve and protect the complex's historic significance and its significant contributions to music history, popular culture, and Cincinnati's music heritage.⁵³⁶

The city government hoped a November ballot issue whereby a parks levy could provide the funding to both acquire and stabilize the deteriorating King complex. However, Mayor Cranley had already insured that at least some funding for stabilization was available several years earlier. While serving on the council, Cranley he made sure that the King buildings fell within a Tax Increment Financing [TIF] district. The State of Ohio

⁵³⁵ Mayor John Cranley, Cincinnati City Council Meeting, October 7, 2015, 27:53, <https://archive.org/details/10151007Coun>

⁵³⁶ Emergency City of Cincinnati Ordinance No. 319-2015, accessed August 7, 2018.

created the TIF program that allowed municipalities to capture tax monies and use them towards the improvement and development in areas in need of renewal efforts.

I put together about twenty of these districts throughout the city when I was on council. I did one in Evanston and purposely put King Records in it hoping that someday we could get it under control and if we needed money to stabilize, renovate, and buy it, the TIF money would be there to do it.⁵³⁷

Ultimately, the city used the TIF money a few years later when the city finally acquired the western portion of the King Complex.

Despite the legislative success to designate the King Records Complex as City of Cincinnati landmark, Dynamic Industries continued to seek redress to what it viewed as a violation of its private property rights. The city landmark status, unlike a National Register designation, prevented property owners from demolishing the building. Dynamic sued the city and argued that the application for historical designation was error-prone and deceptive. Tim Burke, the attorney for Dynamic, continued to make odd arguments in the press in an attempt to defend his client. For example in the *Cincinnati Magazine* article by R. J. Smith, “What Will It Take to Save King Records?,” Burke stated “This is a big building. I know some folks have argued this could be just like Sun Records in Memphis - I gather it’s a block off Beale Street, very close to lots of other activity. This is not.”⁵³⁸ Sun Records is actually over a mile from Beale Street. What is around a building possesses little to nothing to do with a building’s historical significance

⁵³⁷ Mayor John Cranley interview with author, August 10, 2018.

⁵³⁸ RJ Smith, “What Will It Take to Save King Records?,” *Cincinnati Magazine*, January 2016, <http://www.cincinnati-magazine.com/citywiseblog/what-will-it-take-to-save-king-records>, accessed October 31, 2017.

or cultural importance. That might be an argument towards the market challenges that a King commemoration might confront, but not a reason it should not exist. A more comparable example which nullifies Burke's weak and specious argument is the Stax Museum of American Soul, which faces similar location challenges, but succeeded none-the-less.

There is little to no wonder why Burke and Dynamic Industries lost each and every lawsuit and appeal. Dynamic Industries first filed with the First District Court of Appeals who dismissed Dynamic Industries' case. The Ohio Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decision and further denied any and all claims it filed in October 2016. The Supreme Court though noted that Dynamic Industries still possessed remedies and redresses available to them that it had not fully exhausted. While a temporary victory for the preservation of the portion of the complex owned by Dynamic, it by no means was a final nail in the coffin for Dynamic Industries to seek the razing of the building. Also, while landmarked and buying time, Dynamic Industries could simply sit on the building and continue stand idle while it naturally succumbed to the elements and time without any attempt to remediate or even patch any damage. But, the Supreme Court of Ohio's decision provided time, as a loss for the City of Cincinnati meant it must issue a demolition permit.

While the issue of the legality of the city's landmark designation wound its way through courts, the city continued to make both direct and indirect approaches to Dynamic Industries regarding the outright purchase of the King buildings in its

possession in its Brewster complex of buildings. John Cranley recalled this period of flux.

We kept trying those efforts [to purchase the King building] those efforts and there was a developer who did have, finally got something going in a negotiation that included a much larger play for the land because Dynamic had more than just the buildings, other pieces of land.

We never talked to them [Dynamic Industries] about it, but that is what he was telling people, that he wanted to not sell it piecemeal, but the whole thing. So we had a developer who had a good faith idea for how to develop the whole land, who was friendly to our concerns, so they would have figured out a way to help us with the building.⁵³⁹

Since Mayor Cranley possessed previous experience in commercial real estate, he and the various stakeholders in King Records' preservation knew, these deals more often than not fell apart. Thus, the city and the preservationists needed a back-up plan that did not rely on an outside developer's successful purchase or allowed Dynamic Industries to either succeed in working through its various pathways towards demolition or to continue to allow it to let the buildings naturally deteriorate. The next logical and risky step lie in the city to authorize the use of and pursue the implementation of eminent domain and take the building forcibly from Dynamic Industries for its current market value.

While a clear case can be drawn to a valid 'public purpose' argument for the taking of the King Records buildings from Dynamic Industries, it carried with it serious political risk. First, the city government did not want to carry the image that it did not respect the rights of private property, which could imperil the perception of business

⁵³⁹ Mayor John Cranley interview with author.

interests considering Cincinnati for its operations. Second, the City of Cincinnati lost a decision regarding the government's use of eminent domain in the 2006 case *City of Norwood v. Horney*. Norwood, which is just north of Evanston, attempted to take several pieces of property from individuals and businesses for the development of apartments, condominiums, shopping and retail space by Rookwood Partners, Ltd. Rookwood managed to privately acquire most of the seventy parcels, but several individual landowners declined Rookwood's approaches and the City of Norwood authorized the use of eminent domain. While an argument of public and economic benefit could be made by Norwood for an area it considered blighted and in need of economic stimulus, the Ohio Supreme Court disagreed. In its ruling, the Supreme Court defined its position to arrive at a decision.

The issue whether [Norwood] abused its discretion in finding that the area was in danger of deteriorating into a blighted area. The Court does not need to conclude that it would reach the same judgement as Norwood, but only that there was a sound reasoning process and that Council did not abuse its discretion.⁵⁴⁰

In its opinion, the City of Norwood failed to successfully argue that these properties subject to the eminent domain decision did not comply with the definition of blighted and thus did not fall within the purview of Ohio law to be forcibly taken from private owners for market value.

Despite the precedent from the Norwood decision, the City of Cincinnati decided to move forward with authorization to use eminent domain to force the purchase of the

⁵⁴⁰ *City of Norwood v. Horney et al*, 110 Ohio St. 3d 353, 2006 - Ohio - 3799, paragraph 28.

King Records buildings currently owned by Dynamic Industries. Time was of the essence, as the city exhausted every approach to Dynamic Industries to purchase the King buildings and the elements continued to take its toll. With the notable exception of the City of Richmond, Indiana's use of eminent domain to convince the owner of several Starr Piano and Gennett Records buildings to sell, this move proved an exceptionally bold and unprecedented decision to preserve a building of musical and cultural history.

The Cincinnati City Council met on January 19, 2017, to consider Item 21 authorizing the city to acquire the King Records buildings from Dynamic Industries through eminent domain. The Budget and Finance Committee voted unanimously eight to zero in a meeting earlier that day to move forward with the acquisition of the King Buildings. During the Budget and Finance Committee meeting, the council members heard from former King recording artists who had spent several years advocating for the preservation of the building including Otis Williams, Philip Paul, and Bootsy Collins. Constituents filled the public gallery and many spoke on behalf of the motion including Patti Collins from the Bootsy Collins Foundation, Paul Mueller from the Cincinnati Preservation Association, Elliott Ruther from Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation, Anzora Adkins from the Evanston Community Council, Kent Butts from King Studios, and several young members of the community. Ms. Collins also included statements of support from Chuck D of Public Enemy and Jimi Hendrix's sister, Alexis Thompson, a singer and recording artist professionally known as Aziza Love, spoke on behalf of her generation in support of approving the Ordinance. She stated, "When I

heard that my history was being threatened, that was concerning to me.” Ms. Thompson continued to argue for not only King’s preservation but its reinvigoration and place in the Cincinnati of the past, present, and future.

I need space. Not only do I need time, but I need space. I need space for my children and my children’s children and anyone else that I may come in contact with that I need space to prove that where I am from, means something. My history means something.

My history is I-75 construction, Walnut Hills High School, Grippo’s⁵⁴¹, and King Records. Funk, soul, all of that. I am here because of all the wonderful things that have happened in this city and that [King Records] is one of them. In this world, that is one of them. And if you want this city to be great, give us space. Not just us in this room, give the next generation space to cultivate their talents. Silencing that 808 pulse of the city is silencing the voice of every single child that wants to learn more about themselves, the music, their artistry, their soul, their heart. That is in this city, that is King Records, that is each and every one of us. To silence that is to silence the history of this city.⁵⁴²

No one from Dynamic Industries or anyone who opposed the motion spoke at the morning Budget and Finance Committee meeting and vote. The Budget and Finance Committee voted unanimously in favor of the Ordinance

This authorization could be used after it exhausted its approaches to acquire the buildings through purchase or other agreeable means between the two parties. Eminent Domain proves a divisive issue, as it is often perceived as the government interfering with private property rights. During the City Council meeting, some council members, including Chris Seelbach and Charlie Winburn, expressed some concern with its

⁵⁴¹ Grippo’s is a brand of potato chip and the company is based in Cincinnati and opened in 1919.

⁵⁴² Budget & Finance Committee, January 17, 2017, video, <https://ia801604.us.archive.org/28/items/11170117BFC/11170117BFC.mp4>

authorization, but ultimately believed a poignant public benefit argument existed for the case of King Records. Councilman Winburn voiced his opposition to the use of eminent domain, but recognized the impact of saving King Records from demolition and neglect. He stated that in this case, he would agree to its use and authorization. Further he was prepared to agree to take the building today if that was added to the ordinance.⁵⁴³

Councilman Seelbach hoped that Dynamic Industries could become more reasonable in its approach. He stated, “I hope for the sake of history he [Phillip Mitchell, the owner of Dynamic Industries] is reasonable.”⁵⁴⁴ The City Council then voted unanimously to both pursue the purchase and the authorization to use eminent domain, which concluded with a loud round of applause from the attendees in the gallery.

It is important to note that these unanimous votes occurring in favor of various King Records legislation transcended party politics. Representatives who were Democrats, Republicans, and Independents all voted in favor of these legislative motions. Unless the city purchased the building directly from Dynamic Industries, a use of eminent domain was not an immediate resolution to the situation at hand. Eminent domain often takes years of legal maneuvers and court decisions to finally arrive at a successful outcome, especially when the property holder decides to dig its heels in and fight its use, as in the Norwood case. The city government crafted its argument in such a way as to address solid public uses and needs. The estimated price of the 1536 Brewster Avenue

⁵⁴³ “Cincinnati City Council (January 19, 2017)”, video, <https://archive.org/details/10170119Coun>

⁵⁴⁴ Sharon Coolidge, “City May Seize King Records Building,” Cincinnati.com, January 19, 2017, <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/19/city-may-seize-king-records-building/96765394/>, accessed November 5, 2021.

property based solely on the land underneath it was approximately \$220,000 with an additional need for as much as a half-million dollars to stabilize and bring the structure up to code.

In addition to the unanimous vote putting the city on a path of acquisition, the City Council also voted unanimously to rename three streets in the Evanston neighborhood in honor of the three former King Records artists who championed and led the efforts over many years towards King Records' preservation: Otis Williams, Philip Paul, and Bootsy Collins. The city held a ceremony for the streets renaming on January 24, 2017. In November, the Council also honorarily renamed another street after former Famous Flame, Jimmy Railey, in the Walnut Hills neighborhood just south of Evanston.

In April 2017, the nonprofits who long championed King's preservation, King Studios, the Bootsy Collins Foundation, and Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation released various mark-ups and designs for the King buildings then under Dynamic Industries ownership. The designs included a rebuilt recording studio in the original footprint, an exhibit hall, and performance venue. Additionally, it outlined a four-year timeline to both raise private funds and complete the renovation. It also discussed the immediate remediation needs upon the acquisition to include the demolition and reframing of the entire roof, removal of debris, and repair to the garage door openings.⁵⁴⁵ Not discussed in these plans was how a partnership or stewardship of the building might

⁵⁴⁵ Chris Wetterich, "Here's What A Rehabilitated King Records Building Could Look Like," *Cincinnati Business Courier*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2017/04/26/heres-what-a-rehabilitated-king-records-building.html>, accessed October 31, 2017.

occur. For the time being, these three organizations worked together towards a mutually shared goal, along with the Evanston Community Council and Xavier University.

The approaches by the City of Cincinnati failed to budge Dynamic Industries from its desire to either sell its entire twelve-acre property on and around Brewster Avenue or to demolish the buildings that it owned there. Mayor Cranley recalled that, “Our big worry was he [the owner of Dynamic Industries] could keep appealing the demolition permit and he might, in theory, could win that in a Court of Appeals or the Supreme Court.”⁵⁴⁶ Therefor the City Council moved forward with its plans to obtain approval to use the eminent domain authorization it acquired in a January 2017 vote.

The Budget and Finance Committee called for a special meeting June 28, 2017, to hear and vote on “an ordinance authorizing the appropriation of the King Records property” for public use, and “the public purpose of establishing a public memorial to honor the King Records legacy and educate the public of its significant contributions to music and culture, and the public purpose of preserving an important historic asset of the City of Cincinnati.”⁵⁴⁷ While a private developer, sympathetic to preserving the King buildings, possessed a purchase option for the entire Dynamic Industries complex, the committee felt this step necessary due to Dynamic’s active demolition permit request. Without any discussion, debate, or public statements, the Budget and Finance Committee voted unanimously in favor of the Ordinance. Later that day, the City Council also voted

⁵⁴⁶ Interview with Mayor John Cranley with author.

⁵⁴⁷ “Emergency Ordinance No. 177,” June 28, 2017, <https://cincinnati-oh.gov/council/council-events/10-00-a-m-special-meeting-budget-finance-committee2/>, accessed August 8, 2018.

unanimously in favor of Emergency Ordinance No. 177. After the vote, which also contained no discussion, debate, or public comment, Mayor Cranley spoke on the King Records issue. He stated, “We will keep moving forward negotiating with the owner hoping to come to terms, but knowing we had all options in front of us to preserve this important piece of Cincinnati and American history.”⁵⁴⁸ With that, the city and the unnamed private developer continued to seek an agreeable conclusion outside of the court system with Dynamic Industries.

On March 9, 2018, the city reached an agreement to acquire the King Records building at 1536 Brewster, though with no mention of the 1540 building. A Facebook post announced, “On behalf of the leadership of the Evanston Community Council, Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation, King Studios, and the Bootsy Collins Foundation, four core non-profits reviving the King Records legacy together, we are thankful to the City of Cincinnati and owner of the former King Records studio building for coming to terms to save the building and find a win-win path for all.”⁵⁴⁹

The agreement called for a one-dollar land swap whereby the city acquired ownership of the 1536 Brewster King buildings in exchange for a piece of the city’s park property along Interstate 71 and Victory Parkway. “Dynamic Industries wishes to acquire the city’s property along Victory Parkway for assemblage with the adjoining parcels that the developer currently owns. The city desires to acquire the King Records property in

⁵⁴⁸ “Cincinnati City Council, June 28, 2017, video, <https://ia800603.us.archive.org/18/items/10170628Coun/10170628Coun.mp4>

⁵⁴⁹ Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation post on Facebook, March 9, 2018.

order to stabilize, renovate, preserve, and create a public memorial at the building located thereon.”⁵⁵⁰ The City Council voted in favor of the proposed land swap deal again unanimously on April 4, 2018. Item 201800578 authorized the following:

. . . The City Manager to execute a Property Swap Agreement with Dynamic Industries, Inc. pursuant to which the company will transfer property located at 1532-26 Brewster Avenue in Cincinnati, including historic King Records building thereon, to the City, and the City will transfer vacant land on Victory Parkway in Evanston to the company for an even exchange of \$1.00.⁵⁵¹

Soon after the affirmative vote and acquisition of the property, the city used the half-a-million dollars set aside from TIF monies to stabilize the building, rebuild the roof, and clear the property of debris. The total cost of this effort hovered around \$700,000.

The city never intended to run the King Records operation or for its full involvement in its design and execution back to a functional space. During and after it stabilized the building and replaced the roof, several individuals and organizations approached both Mayor Cranley and the City Council with demands that they be designated the stewards or owners of the building despite a lack of funding or plans. Many of the aforementioned had previously vowed to work in harmony and collaboration with the people and organizations who long advocated for preservation of King. Finally, on August 26, 2019, the “Three Kings,” Otis Williams, Philip Paul, and Bootsy Collins, decided enough was enough and sent a letter to the Mayor and City Council. The three

⁵⁵⁰ Chris Wetterich, “City of Cincinnati, Company May Have Struck Deal on Former King Records Building,” *Cincinnati Business Courier*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/Cincinnati/news/2018/03/09/city-of-cincinnati-company-may-have-struck-deal-on.html>, accessed March 13, 2018.

⁵⁵¹ “Proceeding / Minutes of City Council: April 4, 2018,” <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/council/meeting-agendas-minutes/>, accessed August 7, 2018.

former King recording artists asked the city government to form a committee to become the stewards of the King Records building in the city's possession. In their letter, Otis Williams, Phillip Paul, and Bootsy Collins offered the following observation.

Some individuals excited about the King thing with good intentions mistakenly act like the King legacy is theirs and living legacies get treated as an afterthought or prop. Sometimes individuals take advantage of the situation to the expense of the actual King Legacy - akin to a modern day version of stealing songwriting credit. Fortunately, this is the exception to the rule in a movement for King which has been amazing and inspiring. Still, we want to make sure we share such concerns at this time.⁵⁵²

Additionally, Williams, Paul, and Collins thanked Mayor Cranley and the City Council members for their work and endorsed the inclusion of Kent Butts, Patti Collins, Marvin Hawkins, and Elliott Ruther for seats on their vision of a King Legacy board.

Several weeks after the "Three Kings" delivered their August letter, the Cincinnati City Council held a public hearing in October and a vote on the formation of the board and its membership. In addition to the "Three Kings" and their four endorsed people, the motion included Anzora Adkins, Andrew DeWitt, Steve Goodin, Andrew James, Edgar Smith, and Carl Satterwhite acting as a representative for the Mayor's office, and the current Evanston Community Council President, who was at the time of the motion, Gregory Stewart. The proposed motion outlined three charges that the City Council empowered the proposed committee to undertake as the designated stewards of the recently acquired and stabilized King building.

⁵⁵² "Letter to Mayor Cranley and the Cincinnati City Council from Bootsy Collins, Philip Paul, and Otis Williams," August 26, 2019, author's collection.

1. Oversee and implement the vision for the King Brewster buildings, i.e., design and building use, what will happen to make [the] legacy alive with arts, education, civil rights, impacting the community.
2. Organize and execute major celebrity benefit concert to launch capital campaign.
3. Develop long term financial strategy and sustainability plan for the King Brewster Buildings.⁵⁵³

The Council heard from nearly ten declarants in favor of the motion. The only note of opposition came from Evanston Community Council President and member of the King Studios Board of Directors, Gregory Stewart. He stated that this motion only came to his attention on the day of the hearing and requested that the slate of board members include Syd Nathan's nephew Steven Halper. At that time, Halper served as the President of the King Studios group and is and an attorney. He was the first to speak at this meeting where he summarized the make-up of the King Studios board and some of its activities in the time allotted. The Council voted unanimously on the motion which included the original slate of proposed members and the three-pronged charge on October 30, 2019.

Since its formation and despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the King Records Legacy Committee, chaired by Kent Butts, has made major steps forward, including fundraising, non-profit status and incorporation, preparation of a National Register of Historic Places nomination⁵⁵⁴, and outreach. The COVID-19 pandemic hampered and delayed its charge to develop a fundraising concert. At the time of this writing, the

⁵⁵³ "City of Cincinnati Council Motion," October 30, 2019, author's collection.

⁵⁵⁴ The National Register nomination submitted to the Ohio State Preservation Officer was co-written by the author and Dr. Carroll Van West, the Director of the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.

committee has expanded its membership⁵⁵⁵ and is finalizing a community development agreement with the City of Cincinnati that will formally memorialize the organization as the long-term stewards of the King Records buildings. It also is beginning its outreach efforts to various stakeholder communities to develop the vision for bringing the past, present, and future of the King Records legacy together.

⁵⁵⁵ The King Records Legacy Committee, now known as the King Records Legacy Foundation, asked me to join in 2020.

- Chapter Eight -

Conclusion: No More Right Place, Wrong Time



Image Ten: Starday-King Records Building in Madison, Tennessee, photo by author.

I been in the right place
 But it must have been the wrong time.
 I'd have said the right thing
 But must have used the wrong line.
 Dr. John, "Right Place, Wrong Time," 1973.⁵⁵⁶

By April 2022, the National Recording Registry, created by the National Recording Preservation Act of 2000, included over six-hundred sound recordings of not only single tracks, but entire albums and bodies of work. In actuality, the number of protected and preserved sound recordings is several times larger. The federal government interceded and funded the permanent preservation of the product, but not the place. By doing this, it acknowledged the importance of music and sound recordings to the fabric of American history and culture. However, it has done little to nothing to proactively protect the places of its creation and dissemination. Various federal laws and agencies unfortunately "contain no action-forcing mechanism."⁵⁵⁷ Rather, these efforts are left to local advocates or subject specific preservationists and local governments, both of which often lack the knowledge, time, funding, or power to successfully save the place of recorded sound history. Where time is often of the essence, these efforts spend inordinate amounts of time traveling the radical slope of the preservationist learning curve.

⁵⁵⁶ Dr. John, "Right Place, Wrong Time," by Mac Rebenack, released April 1973, ATCO 45-6914, 45 rpm.

⁵⁵⁷ Thomas F. King, *Cultural Resource Laws & Practice* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 235.

A more centralized effort is required of the National Park Service and its National Register of Historic Places program. While it began the Underrepresented Communities Grant Program in 2014, this grant program does not specifically address the needs of all historic recorded music spaces. While the program attempts to identify and intercede with some sites that fall within this definition, it again, relies on much local effort and energy to finally get those buildings in safe hands and on a positive trajectory. In a 2021 keynote speech, African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation executive director, Brent Leggs, was quick to ask what Cincinnati intended to do with the King Records buildings, but offered no direction or offer to assist or guide any efforts for this now city-owned historic property. Additionally, this organization did not join in any of the earlier efforts by the city and local preservationists during the very tense period where the building that housed the recording studio was on the brink of demolition. Some level of involvement from the federal agencies that possess both the know-how and national gravitas to move a project in the direction of preservation, would have added this and several other efforts. If nothing else, the federal acknowledgment and endorsement of the national historical significance could have served as a catalyst for a speedier resolution than its current methodology of awaiting for a local effort to find them.

The National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation should commission a study that identifies all sites prior to the 1990s conversion to digital sound recording that could possess the criteria needed for a National Register designation.

Once identified, the list must include an organized action plan for not only preservation but transitioning these places into current and future relevancy with the past and space as invaluable touch-points. Preservationist Thomas F. King notes that the purpose of these efforts “is not to fossilize historic buildings and structures in their original conditions but to keep them alive, as parts of modern life. Living things have to change, and rehab is our means of making necessary changes while retaining the characteristics that make the place important.”⁵⁵⁸

In addition to federal funding for such a study and necessary seed money to begin a sites acquisition, preservation, and / or interpretation, a partnership with foundations and businesses needs development. The record industry, specifically the three major recording companies Universal Music, Sony Music and Warner Music, must become both active participants and sources of funding for the above. In 2021, these three record companies grossed nearly twenty-billion dollars from the sales, streaming, and licensing of its sound recording copyrights. The three major record companies earned a large percentage of this revenue from its back catalog titles, many of which were created and promoted in these buildings.

Like every other player in the preservation of music history, the major labels remain focused on the people who made the records and the product, but no effort or thought on the places of its creation and dissemination. While building preservation might not lead to any bottom-line profit, it is a part of its corporate social responsibility.

⁵⁵⁸ Thomas F. King, *Cultural Resource Laws & Practice* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 214.

This endeavor is no different from its support for charitable organizations like MusiCares whose mission is to aid musicians and recording professionals with health, personal, and financial issues. Additionally, in 2020, Warner, Sony, and Universal pledged almost a quarter-billion dollars to various organizations dedicated to social and racial justice, a cause and movement that could also be expressed from inside of the four walls of historic record label and recording studio buildings.⁵⁵⁹

The starting place for such an effort lie a book published by Randy McNutt in 2001 entitled *Too Hot to Handle: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of American Recording Studios of the Twentieth Century*. McNutt lists and provides short biographies for over four-hundred recording facilities in the United States. He includes both studios whose buildings still stand, some of which are still functioning, such as FAME Recording in Muscle Shoals, Alabama and Electric Ladyland Studios in New York City, along with those that have since been torn down, such as the Castle Recording Laboratory in Nashville. Additionally in some entries, including the Atlantic Recording Studios and the Columbia Recording Studios, both in New York City, McNutt notes several locations from which each operated, with some detail as to dates and recordings for each. McNutt notes, “I selected the entries based on importance, entertainment value, personal and public interest, history, and whimsy.”⁵⁶⁰ However, McNutt does not include temporary or

⁵⁵⁹ Drew Schwatz, “Three’ Record Companies Pledged \$225 Million to Racial Justice. Where Did It Go?,” *Vice*, May 24, 2021, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88ngp5/what-happened-to-the-money-record-companies-universal-sony-and-warner-pledged-to-racial-justice>

⁵⁶⁰ Randy McNutt, *Too Hot to Handle: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of American Recording Studios of the Twentieth Century* (Hamilton, OH: HHP Books, 2001), 9.

field recording locations, such as the legendary Bristol Sessions or the Dallas and Houston locations of the famous Robert Johnson and Bob Wills recordings. McNutt's book also does not detail the locations of the record labels, unless the label's office also included a studio facility. Regardless, McNutt's work serves as an excellent starting point for any comprehensive survey of the historical sound recording landscape in the United States. The book's publishing date of 2001 also marks the time when sound recording truly became decentralized with the advent of home recording and digital audio workstations and software. Therefore, the majority of his entries fall within the National Park Service's "Fifty Year Rule" when considering sites qualified for the National Register of Historic Places.

With the identification of historic music production and dissemination spaces, the preservation and interpretation of those sites of recorded sound history requires collaboration between the local community, private industry and foundations, national organizations whose mission falls within that sites historical context, and the federal government. Collaborative efforts with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Mississippi Blues Trail, the Blues Foundation, the Americana Triangle, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and others are essential to not only the preservation of sites facing destruction, but for cross-promotional purposes. For example, in expanding the reach of Starr Valley beyond Richmond is the national recognition for its remaining building by the National Register of Historic Places and the installation of historic markers designated by the above organizations with the promotion on its music heritage trails. The Country Music

Hall of Fame should install and promote a marker on the Richmond site commemorating three of four of their shared inductees, Gene Autry, Ernest Stoneman, and Uncle Dave Macon. These Hall of Fame members recorded many of their first or earliest sides in Richmond. The Mississippi Blues trail recently expanded their reach beyond their state's borders and placed a historic marker at the Grafton, Wisconsin site of Paramount Records. Grafton was where many of the greatest and earliest Mississippi blues artists recorded, but many of them also recorded at Gennett. So why not another marker placed in Richmond? The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame placed a marker at the abandoned and deteriorating building that was once home to King Records in Cincinnati, Ohio. Additionally the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry should develop a program of grants designed to preserve the sites where the musicians and professionals created these honored recordings.

Recorded sound history is a shared history that requires a collaborative and organized effort to insure its access to future generations. At the 2016 Tennessee Association of Museums conference, Carolyn Brackett of the National Trust for Historic Places summed up this disconnect between the preservation of the recordings from the place of its creation.

There is a generational memory to music. It is our responsibility to not only have music that they can hear and see digitally, but have the places there, because that is what grounds you. It is just a responsibility that you have that place that you can go and return to it.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁶¹ Carolyn Brackett, "Nashville's 'Frozen Music' - The Architectural and Cultural Heritage of Music Row and Music-Related Sites in Music City," (lecture, Tennessee Association of Museums Conference, Nashville, March 17, 2016).

Preservationist J. Myrick Howard adds, “If you save a historic resource, its stories can still be told...Where historic buildings survive, so does a community’s sense of history and identity.”⁵⁶² Once the site disappears, Americans lose an important contextual touchpoint with its music, culture, identity, and heritage. A collaborative effort led by the federal government should insure that there will never be a preservation effort that is in the right place at the wrong time.

⁵⁶² J. Myrick Howard, *Buying Time for Heritage: How to Save an Endangered Historic Property* (Raleigh, NC: Preservation North Carolina, 2007), 7.

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