

Rebuilding the City of Dreams after the Flood: Nashville Songwriters as the Voice of a Community

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The responses of some members of the Nashville songwriting community to the devastating flood that hit central Tennessee in early May of 2010 complicates a common yet simplistic view of Nashville songwriters as simply one cog in a wheel of generic music production (the “wheel” in this analogy being Music Row¹ in Nashville, Tennessee), and country music as cookie-cutter songs intended to reinforce the narrow worldview of the U.S. and Canadian white working class. These responses demonstrate how songwriters are implicated in a process of reflecting and representing a specific and definable group of actual people, and thus challenge these common yet simplistic views.

There are two metatraditions that contextualize current Nashville songwriters’ work. One is the American popular² songwriter tradition that dates back to the mid-19th century and had its most visible manifestation in Tin Pan Alley (TPA) through the first half of the 20th century.³ Popular songwriters are defined as songwriters-for-hire whom publishers employ and who provide situation-specific content for whatever medium the music industry requires (stage, recordings, radio, television, etc.). Nashville is often referred to as a latter-day Tin Pan Alley specifically because the template that was and still is used in Nashville to define songwriters’ work derives from TPA practices.

The second tradition that Nashville songwriters work within is of course the tradition of Nashville (or country music) itself. Country music has repeatedly undergone sonic and stylistic changes reflective of wider trends in popular music while still maintaining its traditional emphasis on “rural life, work and everyday working-class life (especially contrasted with that of the affluent), heterosexual ‘salvific love’, family life and ‘values’, the southern U.S., youthful rebellion, Christianity, alcohol, death, humour, and nostalgia”.⁴

While the values and lifestyles alluded to above are still espoused in hit country songs, Music Row itself is perceived by many as a small network of powerful gatekeepers who hold secret meetings to decide the future, or of deals being cut over a couple of drinks at a show and sealed with a handshake. While the truth is much more nuanced, this perception is not without legitimacy. Music Row’s

gatekeepers are the record producers and radio executives. It is they that ultimately decide what will get recorded (or “cut”), what will be on the radio, and what will become the focus of promotion (in the form of advertising and marketing). Other, lesser gatekeepers are the artists’ managers, who are constantly trolling publishers’ catalogues for the next potential hit songs for performers on their rosters, and the three performance rights organizations (ASCAP, BMI and SESAC) that promote the songs of the writers they collect royalties for.

While country music’s identity as a mass-mediated popular music is comparatively easy to examine, its vernacular⁵ qualities are far more contestable. Nevertheless, country music’s vernacular manifestations are an important factor in country music’s ongoing relevance. Since its commercial inception, country music has been people’s music, however hard to pinpoint the people that it represents are. As such, Nashville songs are cultural objects, and to some extent Nashville songwriters respond to and/or influence their culture. Do they give voice to an extended “imagined community”,⁶ or are they simply working with their publishers to manipulate their target market of listeners into buying their products? Sociocultural and commercial considerations are both always present, and both have always been characteristics of country music for the entirety of its almost ninety years of existence. It is the paradoxical task of Nashville songwriters to create songs that both are reflective of country music tradition to audiences and also satisfy producers’ demands for continual renewal of the Nashville sound, thus placing songwriters in parallel roles as both perpetuators and innovators.

The figure of the songwriter looms large in Nashville as the creative individual that produces the raw material which fuels the activities of the Music Row apparatus. As creative individuals working within a commercial process that both relies on and financially exploits their creativity, Nashville songwriters could be considered artisans.⁷ Are they also bards?⁸ Do they speak for a larger community, voicing their concerns and values? Perhaps songwriters themselves represent an extended community of like-minded individuals, as many claim they do.

With these issues in mind, here are presented two brief case studies involving members of the Nashville songwriting community and their responses to a devastating flood in central Tennessee in May 2010.

NSAI and Flood Relief

The Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) has existed since 1969 as a political advocacy and support organization for songwriters, and is in fact the largest lobby group currently registered in Washington D.C., representing over 4500 members. The organization also acts as a liaison between the songwriting community⁹ and the commercial music industry, and as such fosters unsigned writers by offering workshops, seminars, critique sessions, and other resources of relevance to anyone trying to get a publishing deal or a song recorded. NSAI is based in a former studio building on the west side of Music Row and operates dozens of chapters worldwide.

The community nature of the organization is clear from the mission statement on its website: “The NSAI consists of a body of creative minds, including songwriters from all genres of music, professional and amateur, who are committed to protecting the rights and future of the profession of songwriting, and to educate, elevate, and celebrate the songwriter and to act as a unifying force within the music community and the community at large.”¹⁰

This goal of acting as a “unifying force” was realized in the weeks and months after the Cumberland River overflowed its banks between May 4-6, 2010. The basement of the NSAI building acted as an impromptu donation drop-off, and was filled with donated clothing, food, water, diapers, cleaning products, and other general household necessities. These donations were distributed on an ad hoc basis to needy residents. NSAI also coordinated teams of workers to go and help overwhelmed homeowners.

NSAI represents not only professional, full-time songwriters but also amateur songwriters, and as such they were truly able to act “within the music community and the community at large”, as noted in their mission statement. NSAI members live all over central Tennessee and as such there were connections made with networks of volunteer workers and suppliers that these members interact with in their professional and personal lives. No other Music Row organization coordinated similar efforts, nor did any other Music Row location act as a public drop spot (though NSAI staff member Dave Petrelli¹¹ was quick to point out the donation efforts of several Music Row companies as part of the flood relief efforts). Petrelli talked about the anxiety that existed

after the flood as people were aware of the devastation that had happened to their neighbours, were anxious to help, but had no outlet or focus for such impulses.

Acting quickly like the group of volunteers and employees at NSAI did highlights the effective contacts network within NSAI. Being the hub of a network of members that also had connections with the wider music and non-music community around Nashville is an indication of the extent of the membership base. Operating within their mandated role in the community shows a level of commitment to their enterprise. All are manifestations of the uniqueness of an organization like NSAI. NSAI’s flood relief efforts also shed light on the distinct social position of the songwriter in Nashville, given that no other network of Music Row figures acted or were able to mobilize themselves in similar, broad-based ways to provide resources to flood victims.

Victoria Banks and *City of Dreams*

One songwriter to become directly involved with flood relief efforts is Victoria Banks. Banks was born in Port Carling, Ontario, and moved to Nashville in 1997 to work as a songwriter. Performers who have recorded her songs include Sara Evans, Cowboy Crush, One More Girl, and Johnny Reid (currently the highest-selling country star in Canada). Her co-writers include Carolyn Dawn Johnson, Gretchen Wilson, Danielle Peck, Tia Sillers, and Gary Nichols. Her best-known song became the highest debuting first single for a new country artist in Billboard chart history in 2008: Jessica Simpson’s “Come on Over”. Banks is also a performer, and released her CD, *Never Be the Same*, in 2011.



Figure 1: The Spring 2010 flood in downtown Nashville (all photos courtesy Victoria Banks)



Figure 2: Downtown Nashville buildings under water

Banks was touring in Canada with Randy Travis and his band when the Cumberland River overflowed. She wrote a song in its entirety on the flight back to Nashville on May 3, 2010, as the river continued to rise (it eventually crested late in the day on Tuesday, May 4). The song is called “City of Dreams”, and although it never received widespread airplay or popularity, the song itself and the video project that Banks spearheaded after writing it are worth scrutinizing as a way to examine the role songwriters play within the Nashville infrastructure.

After Banks recorded her own version that same night and made a simple video (a series of flood shots either taken by her boyfriend or copied from various Facebook pages) she posted her creation on YouTube. Eric Legg (Dixie Chicks, Martina McBride), a recording engineer she had worked with as an artist, called her a week later and said that he had played Banks’s video for a group of studio musicians he was working with that day at Ocean Way Studios (a renovated church in the heart of Music Row). Legg and these musicians (Kelly Back, Mark Hill, Charlie Judge, Troy Lancaster, Mike Rojas, Biff Watson and Scott Williamson) had all agreed that they would all donate their time and energy to re-recording Banks’s song. Legg also showed Banks’s video to the studio’s management, as well as a video production team (NFocus) that was at the studio on the same day. They too agreed to donate their resources toward realizing Legg’s idea, which was to put together a “We Are the World”-style audio/video project using Legg’s production connections. He wanted to use the recording of this song as a fund- and awareness-raising effort benefiting the Red Cross’ flood relief efforts, and he wanted Banks to use her performer and songwriter

connections to convince a group of singers to come to the studio and be part of the project.

Banks quickly solicited willing participants amongst her network of past and present cowriters, many of them Canadian artist and songwriter acquaintances (including Deric Ruttan, Jason Blaine, Michelle Wright, George Canyon and Dave and Kortney Wilson). On Friday, May 14, the session musicians recorded the instrumental tracks, and the following day, 32 singers, an 11-member audio production team, and a 10-member video production team (as well as publicists, caterers, and supportive colleagues) recorded and filmed a video for “City of Dreams”, with every single participant donating their time and expertise (including for later audio mixing by Legg at South Street Studios, audio mastering by Jonathan Russell at Masterfonics, and video editing by the NFocus team). The song was available for digital download almost immediately, and the accompanying video was edited and made available within three weeks.¹² As of now, the recording and video have helped raise tens of thousands of dollars for the American Red Cross flood relief efforts through online sales.



Figure 3: Nashville singers and songwriters gather to record “City of Dreams”

Significance of “City of Dreams”

Nashville and Music Row represent a unique phenomenon in music. The confluence of a distinct mass mediated music genre and a single site of production over six-plus decades has no direct parallel. Whatever it is that country songs mean is both highly influenced by and responded to by decision makers on Music Row, and thus the context in which songwriters work is largely defined for them. Almost no Nashville songwriters are from Nashville, and their decisions to relocate and the struggles many went through to get there are seminal

and decisive events in their lives. Banks has described the process of embedding herself in the culture and the trial and error learning that accompanied her relocation to Nashville. She has recounted the necessity of learning “how the Row works” and how difficult it is to fit within its seemingly strict, yet often elusive, parameters. As she puts it, Nashville songwriters are “the ones that are creating what’s going to happen on the radio three years from now, right now”.¹³ Given outsider perspectives such as hers and her fellow songwriters, how can we understand “City of Dreams”?

At a moment of crisis, Banks not only was able to create a song and video intended to draw attention to the flood crisis and encourage victims, she was able to collaborate with a prominent producer/engineer and member of the Music Row production apparatus as well as leverage her position and expertise within the songwriting community to organize a larger fundraising project. This project gained a life beyond even her own vision, but was inspired by the collective effort she spearheaded. While the effort should obviously be lauded on its own terms, what are interesting are the particular aspects of a Nashville songwriters’ practice that it highlights.



Figure 4: Banks directs singers in the studio

One is the nature of the overlapping networks of expertise that comprise the scene surrounding Music Row. Banks is a published and established songwriter, already accustomed to working within a system that requires one to know its complexities in order to promote one’s songs. She regularly collaborates with other writers, and as such has fostered a large network of colleagues. She is a performer, and thus accesses other networks of management teams, booking agents, local sponsors, venue managers, and fans.

Her use of social networking to both receive information while the flood was happening and make

the song available to anyone with an internet connection is evidence of a thoroughly modern strategy that is being exploited on Music Row. The “social network” actually received a very tangible physical manifestation in the “City of Dreams” project, and reminds us that no matter what technology is employed, Nashville’s Music Row is characterized above all as a place where the collective energy of a vast array of individuals is harnessed every day in order to create and transmit musical products.¹⁴

Knowledge of this community helps contextualize “City of Dreams”, but of course none of these aspects of the community mean that the songs Victoria Banks is writing and her publishers are plugging, including “City of Dreams”, are anything but products existing for their potential profitability. The fact that Banks used her songwriting connections to collaborate with other songwriters and members of the Music Row apparatus seems to imply that if this song is the statement of a community, it is the songwriting community, or perhaps the Music Row community, that it gives voice to, not the Nashville community or the country music community. To complicate matters further, it is likely that she was able to write and produce a song like this is because she is Canadian (or at least that the song’s lyrics appear to be from someone with an outsider perspective). Furthermore, the song and video did not receive widespread airplay, and raised a modest, decidedly un-“We Are the World”-like amount of money for the flood-relief efforts,¹⁵ thus calling into question how significant the project ultimately could have been.

While mindful of these critiques, I argue that we can imagine “City of Dreams” as a bard-like representation of a community and its attempts to cope emotionally with a devastating situation. Her evocation of Nashville as a place of dreams is remarkably poignant given that for most participants in country music culture Nashville is just that, an imagined place with which they might feel some familiarity, but only the familiarity that comes from imaginations stirred by repeated references to this city in song and discourse. Banks’s song reminds us that Nashville is a real place, yet seems to use the idea of dreams as a source of hope for renewal. Nashville is more than a city of dreams, but dreams will play an important role in overcoming devastating loss. She thus preserves, and even utilizes, the imaginary elements of Nashville so familiar to country music audiences, even as she calls attention to the devastation of the physical place.

It would be difficult to definitively argue that Nashville songwriters belong to the same distinct cultural group as country music audiences. Neither

group's diversity allows for such generalizations. Nevertheless, the maintenance of country music's vernacular identity is not just a perpetuation of a historically constructed myth. Though highly mass mediated and largely constituted by its gatekeepers on Music Row, country music is made through the combined efforts of many individuals and networks of individuals, all attempting to respond to and reflect the values and everyday experiences of its audience members. In other words, though perhaps not a vernacular music in the proper sense, country music is "vernacular" in that it is definitively connected with people, their daily lives, their individual and collective efforts, their personal beliefs and values.

NSAI's flood-relief efforts and Banks' *City of Dreams* seem to both complicate and affirm country music's claim to be a vernacular expression, and demonstrate how Nashville songwriters' accounts comment on a series of larger sociocultural and commercial processes and provide a unique window through which to observe both Music Row and the discourse surrounding country music culture more broadly.

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Notes

¹ Music Row refers both to the commercial music apparatus in Nashville generally, and also the former residential area just to the west of the downtown that houses many of the companies that make and sell country music.

² Scholars define "popular music" primarily as any type of music that is mass mediated (i.e., promoted through mass media) and created and recorded with attention paid to its marketability and profitability. Though a vague descriptor, it is commonly used to pit broad categories of sounds or genres against other broad categories (particularly "art" and "vernacular" or "folk" musics).

³ Tin Pan Alley was characterized by a method of production in which professional songwriters were employed by publishers who were marketing their songs through popular entertainment mediums (mostly the vaudeville stage) and by employing current technology (sheet music intended for parlour piano use). TPA was also involved in the decon-textualization of "traditional" or vernacular musics, and the altering of these musics in order to create larger markets.

⁴ Geoffrey Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White?: Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31/1(2008): 81.

⁵ "Vernacular" means "1. (Of language) native or indigenous (as opposed to literary or learned). 2. Expressed or written in the native language of a place, as literary works: *a vernacular poem*. 3. Using such a language: *a vernacular speaker*. 4. Using plain, everyday, ordinary language." (dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vernacular>). As long as country music is thought of as a vernacular music, there is a concurrent perception that there is a distinguishable group of people

that are responsible for and represented by country music, however debatable this perception is.

⁶ I am borrowing the phrase “imagined community” from Benedict Anderson’s term, which he applies to nations and political groups. The term refers to the phenomenon of a series of individuals who feel an affiliation with a wider group of people that they will never encounter. Daniel Boorstin’s idea of the “consumptive community” extends Anderson’s concept into the commercial realm.

⁷ The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines “artisan” as “1. A worker who practices a trade or handicraft: craftsman. 2. One that produces something (as cheese or wine) in limited quantities often using traditional methods”. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artisan>). The term predates modern industrial capitalism, but has more recently been used to denote a worker who produces commodified objects that are considered to have artistic or craft-like qualities.

⁸ A “bard” is “1. A tribal poet-singer skilled in composing and reciting verses on heroes and their deeds. B. A composer, singer, or declaimer of epic or heroic verse”. (Merriam Webster online dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bard>).

⁹ While they do not restrict membership to writers of country music exclusively, NSAI’s location and Nashville’s almost-exclusive status as a center of songwriting ensures that the majority of members identify themselves as country music songwriters (or another genre that has an identifiable relationship with country music).

¹⁰ This mission statement and more on the NSAI can be found on the NSAI website: (<http://nashvillesonwriters.com/news.php?viewStory=88>).

¹¹ I interviewed Dave Petrelli, an NSAI employee and an excellent singer, pianist and songwriter in his own right, in late May of 2011, a little over a year after the events he was recounting.

¹² The video that resulted can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjoDpmNYaas>.

¹³ Interview with author, August 10, 2010.

¹⁴ I mean to highlight the fact that many different people make a country music song, as opposed to a method that is more typical of other arenas of North American popular music production in which a single producer can make decisions with minimal involvement from other songwriters and musicians and a much larger reliance on digitally-produced sounds.

¹⁵ I do not know of any figures available, though monies continue to be collected via donations and delayed airplay royalties.



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