

ERNEST TUBB RECORD SHOP
417 Broadway
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS TN-264
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ERNEST TUBB RECORD SHOP

HABS No. TN-264

Location: 417 Broadway, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

The coordinates for this building are 36.160427 N, -86.777633 W and were obtained through Bing maps (www.bing.com/maps/) on July 11, 2012. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: 417 Broadway is a three-story brick building that faces north onto Broadway between 4th and 5th Aves. It is one of four companion buildings that were constructed prior to the Civil War, with deeds suggesting that they were built in the mid-1850s.

During the 1940s, the stretch of Broadway where number 417 is located became associated with country music because of its proximity to the Ryman Auditorium. Between 1943 and 1974, the Ryman was the venue from where the popular country music show the *Grand Ole Opry* was broadcast on a weekly basis by the Nashville radio station WSM.¹ The Ryman is only half a block north of the 400 block of Broadway and the success of the *Opry* drew both music performers and fans to area. This led in turn to the establishment of record shops, live performance bars, and other music-related businesses in the neighborhood.

The building at 417 Broadway began to play a role in Nashville's country music industry in August 1951 when it became home to the Ernest Tubb Record Shop. Ernest Tubb (1914-1984) was a singer-songwriter and actor who appeared on the *Grand Ole Opry* from 1943 until his death over four decades later and became one of its biggest stars.² His eponymous store was the first major record shop devoted to country music. It was also the venue for the Tubb-hosted country music radio show *Midnite Jamboree* which was broadcast on WSM after the *Grand Ole Opry*, and on which many country stars appeared.

As of 2012, the Ernest Tubb Record Shop remains in operation at 417 Broadway. The *Midnite Jamboree* continues to be broadcast today but comes from a different venue.

Description: This three-story, flat-roofed, brick structure is the eastern-most unit of four attached antebellum commercial buildings. It is the largest of the four units owing to its greater depth.

A photograph taken of the block during the Civil War shows that the front façades of the four units were originally all the same (Figure 1).³ The block was constructed in a Neoclassical style and each of the storefronts consisted of three sets of two-leaf doors with large areas of glazing above a low wood section with raised panels. Each door leaf

¹ *Ryman Auditorium Timeline*. <http://www.ryman.com/history/> (accessed July 6, 2012).

² Ronnie Pugh, "Ernest Tubb," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 547-49.

³ Image #116: Broad between Cherry and Summer, THS V-B-2, Folder 56, Box 4, James Hoobler Photograph and Drawing Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

had ten divided lights. Between every set of doors, and also at either end of the four buildings, there were what appear to be either engaged stone columns or stone pilasters with classical capitals.

On both of the two upper stories, each unit had a set of four windows arranged as a pair four over four double hung sash windows flanked on either side by six over six double hung sash windows. Each set of windows shared a shallow sill and a decorative Neoclassical hood. A Neoclassical cornice stretched across the top of the structure and formed a parapet.

Today, the four units have been substantially altered and it is now much less clear that they are companion structures (Figure 2). At the storefront level, none of the columns or two-leaf doors remains and the Neoclassical cornice has been removed. In the place of the original cornice and parapet there is now metal coping. The window hoods are gone, revealing plain, flat stone lintels. The windows of the two upper floors retain the original one/two/one fenestration pattern. However, on 417 Broadway all the windows have been replaced by one over one double hung wood sash windows. Plain stone lintels are visible above each

The storefront at 417 Broadway currently consists of a wood kick plate, storefront windows and a clerestory above them; this arrangement wraps a short distances onto the east side façade. The main doorway is located at the east side of the north (front) facade. The storefront level is topped by a long blue sign that bears the words “Ernest Tubb Record Shop” in white.

At second floor, perpendicular to the north façade and spanning the height of the entire floor, there is a large illuminated sign which shows a guitar, a picture of Ernest Tubb and again the words “Ernest Tubb Record Shop.” Above the windows on the second story there is a blue sign centrally placed and attached to the wall bearing once more the words “Ernest Tubb Record Shop” and an image of a guitar.

The brickwork on the front façade appears to be of varying ages, indicating that repairs have taken place, and is mostly laid in a five to one common bond. The east wall of the building is composed of brickwork that again suggests a variety of ages and is also mostly laid using five to one common bond. There are a number of bricked-in openings on the first, second, and third floor levels. This work was done within the last ten years in order to strengthen the walls.⁴ The site slopes down away from Broadway, revealing a much higher stone foundation at the rear façade.

History: The Ernest Tubb Record Shop at 417 Broadway is the eastern-most unit of four companion buildings located on the lower section of Broadway between 4th and 5th Aves. Its establishment at this location was part of a trend of music-related commercial ventures moving into the area from the 1940s onwards due to the street’s close proximity to the Ryman Auditorium. The Ryman was the broadcast venue for the popular country music radio show the *Grand Ole Opry* between 1943 and 1974, and its success drew both musicians and music fans to the area.⁵ Businesses that catered to their needs and interests

⁴ Stephen Bowen, manager of the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, personal communication with author, August 2, 2012.

⁵ *Ryman Auditorium Timeline*. <http://www.ryman.com/history/> (accessed July 6, 2012).

soon followed and the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, the first such store devoted to selling country music recordings, was a prime example of this.

Broadway was originally called Broad Street and deeds indicate that a John Bell was the original owner of the four attached buildings, and therefore possibly also the builder. In December 1856, Bell sold each of the four units to different owners; the building now known as 417 Broadway was bought by M. S. Allen for \$4150 on December 9th.⁶ The original use of 417 is not clear, although it is known that 421 Broadway was sold to William Stockell, who traded in cement and terracotta products, plaster of Paris, fire bricks and fireware.⁷

During the Civil War, the four attached structures were used as a hospital.⁸ Outside of that exceptional period, this part of Nashville has been a primarily commercial district with many businesses on lower Broadway dealing in furniture, hardware, feed, and grain.⁹ City directories indicate that by the early twentieth century, there were also several grocery stores, barbers, and pawnbrokers on the 400 block, along with at least one hotel, a restaurant, a watchmaker, and shoemaker.¹⁰ By 1929, the Linton McPherson hardware company was located at 417 Broadway.¹¹ A decade later it was being used by Dotson W. C. Furniture.¹²

By the time that the Ernest Tubb Record Store took over the building in August 1951, a number of music-related businesses had already appeared on lower Broadway. This was due in part to the street's proximity to the Ryman Auditorium, then the location of the *Grand Ole Opry* show. Located at 116 5th Ave North, the Ryman is only a half block north and the success of the *Opry* drew performers and fans to the surrounding area. This in turn led to businesses that catered to their needs and interests setting up shop nearby, among them record stores. For example, C. V. Hitchcock - one of the city's earliest jukebox operators and wholesale record salesmen - moved his business, Hermitage Music, into 416A Broadway (across the road from 417 Broadway) in 1943. Two years later, he relocated it to 421 and 423 Broadway (i.e. two of the companion buildings to 417 Broadway).¹³ Another record vendor called Louis Buckley also had a retail outlet on the

⁶ Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 33, page 488. 419 Broadway was sold on December 9 to Peter Billird (book 26, page 104), 423 Broadway was sold the same day to Joseph Horton (book 27 page 30) and 421 Broadway was sold on December 19 to William Stockell (book 26, page 250).

⁷ Katrina McDaniel, *Nashville Then and Now* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2005), 68.

⁸ James A. Hoobler, *Cities Under the Gun: Images of Occupied Nashville and Chattanooga* (Nashville Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1995), 106.

⁹ David Paine, *National Register of Historic Places – Nomination Form: Broadway Historic District, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee* (United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 1979). Both sides of Broadway between 2nd Ave and 5th Ave form the "Broadway Historic District" which was added to the National Register in 1979.

¹⁰ *Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Marshall, Bruce, Polk and Company, 1910), 1080. In both the 1910 and the 1920 directories, an M. Ryan is shown as the occupant 417 Broadway but the nature of the Ryan business is unclear. See *Nashville City Directory* (1920), 1279.

¹¹ *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: R. L. Polk and Co, 1929), 722.

¹² *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1938), 1029; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1940), 1058.

¹³ Martin Hawkins, *A Shot in the Dark: Making Records in Nashville, 1945-55* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 2007), 19.

street.¹⁴ Therefore, when Ernest Tubb moved in with his eponymous shop, his operation was part of a trend. However, what made the Tubb store unique was that it was the first such enterprise dedicated to selling recordings solely of country music. The other businesses in town tended to deal mostly in pop music.¹⁵

Ernest Tubb himself was a very popular country music singer-songwriter who appeared on the *Grand Ole Opry* from 1943 until his death over four decades later.¹⁶ He opened the store, with his tax accountant Charles Mosely as his partner, both as a means to invest his money and in response to fans of the country music genre who were unable to gain access to the records they wanted to buy.¹⁷ The business was initially a mail-order only operation but it was then decided a store for walk-in customers was necessary. Its original location was 720 Commerce Street (one block north of Broadway) and it opened on May 3, 1947. Ronnie Pugh, who has written a biography of Tubb, describes the establishment of the Ernest Tubb Record Shop as having had “more impact on country music’s growth than any comparably sized venture” as it allowed fans to acquire desired recordings and spawned a series of similar music-star owned specialty country music stores.¹⁸

The Ernest Tubb Record Shop also became a live performance venue when Tubb began to host a *Midnite Jamboree* from the store. The *Midnite Jamboree* was broadcast on WSM on Saturday nights after the *Grand Ole Opry* and became a fixture on Nashville’s musical scene, with many country music stars making guest appearances. Records were also played during the show meaning that it gave Tubb the opportunity to plug both his store and its companion mail-order operation. So many people came to hear the *Midnite Jamboree* it was decided that a larger venue was necessary. Accordingly, in August 1951, Tubb moved both the sales operation and the *Midnite Jamboree* to the building at 417 Broadway.¹⁹

The store’s business was affected when the *Grand Ole Opry* show ceased to be broadcast from the Ryman Auditorium in 1974, although the character of lower Broadway had changed before that. By the early 1970s, many of the premises on the street were occupied by adult movie-houses and peep shows. In 1972, Tubb told a reporter:

¹⁴ Hawkins, 19.

¹⁵ Craig Havighurst, *WSM: Air Castle of the South and the Making of Music City* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 147.

¹⁶ Pugh, “Ernest Tubb,” 547-49. In 1965, Tubb became the sixth person to be elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

¹⁷ Ronnie Pugh, *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 121-22. The Ernest Tubb Record Shop lost money for the first five years it was in business, not least because the 78 rpm records that it sent out as part of its mail-order operation were so fragile. See Mary Hance, “Tubb began record shop for fans,” *Nashville Banner*, 2 May 1987, A-1. Tubb himself apparently had difficulty in keeping the store stocked and is recorded as saying that when it opened, “there was only one place in Nashville you could buy country music records, and this was a jukebox operator with Hermitage Music” i.e. the company belonging to the C.V. Hitchcock. See Hawkins, 19.

¹⁸ Pugh, *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour*, 121,123-24.

¹⁹ The exact date the *Midnite Jamboree* began is unclear but seems likely to have been either some time in 1947 with the show taking place in the store from early 1948. Pugh, *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour*, 147, 172.

Even if the Opry wasn't movin', I'd be concerned about what's happenin' to the block. They've ruined this whole section with the peep shows and all. It used to be only Tootsie's, Linebaugh's, the record shop and some souvenir places.²⁰

Nonetheless, Tubb chose not to close the store down but instead used the site as the main base for the mail-order operation while also maintaining the walk-in store. However, he opened a second branch on Demonbreun Street close to Music Row and the then-site of the Country Music Hall of Fame and immediately moved *Midnite Jamboree* to that location.²¹ In 1979, he opened another location on Music Valley Drive, close to the new home of the *Grand Ole Opry*, and moved the *Midnite Jamboree* to the "Texas Troubadour Theater" that had been built adjacent to that store.²²

Meanwhile, a downtown revitalization program begun in the 1980s - overseen by the Metro Development and Housing Agency along with other organizations - sought to bring more diversity to the nature of the businesses operating on lower Broadway and develop the street as a historic district.²³ As a result of this - and of the 2001 relocation of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum to the area - Broadway has evolved into a tourist destination and become home to many music bars, restaurants and other businesses likely to attract visitors, particularly those interested in Nashville's association with the country music industry.

Against this backdrop, the Ernest Tubb Record Shop continues to function at 417 Broadway as a country music record shop.²⁴ The retail operation is situated on the first floor and within the store area there is also a small stage on which live performances of music continue take place on a sporadic basis. The mail-order operation is located in the basement. The upper floors are vacant. The store is now owned by David McCormick, who originally joined the store as a part-time employee in 1968.

Sources: Published Sources and Reports

Havighurst, Craig. *WSM: Air Castle of the South and the Making of Music City*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Hoobler, James A. *Cities Under the Gun: Images of Occupied Nashville and Chattanooga*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1995.

McDaniel Katrina. *Nashville Then and Now*. San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2005.

²⁰ Michael Willard, "Grand Ole Opry Quits Skid Row," *Pittsburgh Press*, 8 October 1972, n.p., quoted in Pugh, *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour*, 285.

²¹ Jay Orr, "Music City: Tubb's Dreams play on in shop," *The Tennessean*, 1 May 1997, B2.

²² Pugh, *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour*, 293.

²³ Bill Hudgins, "Lower Broad can be transformed: study," *Nashville Banner*, 17 December 1982, n.p..

²⁴ The branch of the Ernest Tubb Record Shop at Music Valley Drive, Nashville continues to function (as does the Texas Troubadour Theater) and there are further stores in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee and Fort Worth, Texas.

Paine, David. *National Register of Historic Places – Nomination Form: Broadway Historic District, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee*. United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 1979.

Pugh, Ronnie. *Ernest Tubb – The Texas Troubadour*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Pugh, Ronnie. “Ernest Tubb.” In *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, 547-49. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Collections, Repositories and Archives

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE:

Davidson County Register of Deeds: Property deeds.

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

Metro Archives: Clippings files, property deeds and maps.

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

Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library: City Directories, downtown survey, clippings files, maps, photo archives and microfilms.

Tennessee State Library and Archives: Records of business incorporation, maps, photo archives and microfilms.

Historian: Rachel Hopkin, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2012

Project

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



Figure 1: A view of Broad Street between Cherry and Summer Streets taken during the Civil War and therefore showing the Ernest Tubb Record Shop building and its companion structures shortly after construction.
Source: James Hoobler Photograph and Drawing Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives



Figure 2: The Ernest Tubb Record Shop
Source: Photograph by author, 18 February 2012.