

TOOTSIE'S ORCHID LOUNGE
422 Broadway
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS TN-265
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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

TOOTSIE'S ORCHID LOUNGE

HABS No. TN-265

Location: 422 Broadway, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

The coordinates for this building are 36.160912 N, -86.778282 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: 422 Broadway is a two-story brick commercial structure, which is estimated to have been built ca. 1870. It is decorated with Italianate moldings and painted a striking mauve color. Since 1960, it has been home to the well-known country music bar, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge (Figure 1).

Tootsie's Orchid Lounge is located on Nashville's lower Broadway in an area that has been primarily commercial in nature since the mid-nineteenth century. The street's association with country music took off in the 1940s because of its proximity to the Ryman Auditorium. Between 1943 and 1974, the Ryman was the venue for the popular country music show the *Grand Ole Opry*, which was broadcast 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 their fans to area. This in turn led to various music-related businesses setting up shop nearby.

The establishment of Tootsie's Orchid Lounge as a bar/live performance venue/musicians' gathering place was part of this trend. Its original owner was Hattie Louise "Tootsie" Bess who had a reputation for being hospitable towards performers. The back entrance to 422 Broadway is located across an alley from the Ryman Auditorium's stage door, and many *Opry* entertainers would spend time at the place between sets.

Business suffered when the *Grand Ole Opry* moved out of the Ryman Auditorium in 1974. However, Bess continued to run Tootsie's Orchid Lounge until her death in 1978. Since then, the bar has changed hands a number of times and undergone several temporary closures, but in the main it has continued to be a popular tourist spot. Its fortunes are very much tied to those of lower Broadway more generally.

Description: 422 Broadway is a two-story, flat-roofed Victorian brick building decorated with Italianate window moldings and painted a striking purple color (with some black trim). Most of the south facing storefront has been altered, although the belt course that runs between the first and second story and the round arch doorway near the east corner appear to be original. Round arch openings, also seen at the second floor window openings, are characteristic of the Italianate style. The doorway is topped with a heavy Italianate hood molding and the belt course above has large decorative brackets.

To the west of this doorway, there are two large glass windows with a recessed, largely glass, doorway set between them. This doorway serves as the main entrance to the bar. The two large glass windows are rimmed with thick magenta borders in which are set

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

intermittent photographs depicting famous musicians and people visiting the bar. Both windows also bear the slogans "World Famous Tootsies Orchid Lounge," with the words spelled out using a range of lettering.² Also at storefront level, there is a clerestory which runs above the main entrance and display windows.

There are four round arch window openings at the second floor, each containing a one over one sash wood sash with an arched upper rail. These window openings are topped with the same heavy Italianate hood molding as the door on the first floor. There are lug sills beneath the windows. At the roof level, there is a row of dentils and a metal cornice with large decorative brackets. These brackets match those in the belt course.

On the interior, the first floor is divided into two levels by a mezzanine. There are bars and bar seating on both levels and most of the walls are covered with photographs of country music performers. The second floor is used as offices.

History: 422 Broadway is a two-story brick structure located on lower Broadway in heart of Nashville's downtown area. It is estimated to have been constructed ca. 1870 and since 1960 it has been home to the well-known country music bar, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge.

Determination of the estimated date of construction has come from a number of sources. The 1888 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* confirms that the building was in place by that year, and the building's Italianate style suggests that it was mostly likely built some time between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s.³ Meanwhile, an examination of the property deeds has shown that a larger parcel on Broad Street (the original name of Broadway) - which included the lot on which 422 Broadway now stands - was purchased on January 22, 1856 by Russell Houston.⁴ Houston, a local attorney, was very active as a land speculator in Davidson County during the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ He disposed of various portions of this Broad Street parcel at different times, with the sale of lot 422 taking place on February 26, 1869.⁶ Its new owner was one Solomon Furstenburg. At the time of this property transfer, the Civil War was four years in the past and Nashville had seen an influx of northerners with money to invest. It therefore seems possible that Houston either built 422 Broadway as an investment just prior to the sale or that Furstenburg purchased the land with the specific intention of erecting a new building on it.

² There is no apostrophe used in the word "Tootsies" in the lettering on the windows.

³ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, Nashville, Tennessee, (1888), Sheet 4. Comparison was made with the 1952 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, volume 1, sheet 3, in order to help determine that the footprint of the 1888 map and that in the more recent map were one in the same. The 1952 map suggests some alterations where made in the intervening period but that the buildings were essentially the same.

⁴ *Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee*. Book 22, page 600. The sale was actually made by the previous owner, William Morgan, to a James Johnson. However two further deeds indicate Johnson was acting on behalf of Houston: Deed book 17, page 304, which dates from June 25, 1853, records a mortgage deed between Morgan and Mr. Hugh Erwin, and a later note has been added stating the property had been sold to Houston as per deed book 26, page 122. Deed book 26, page 122 dates from January 14, 1857 and shows a release of the aforementioned mortgage by Erwin and it confirms both that the mortgage had been paid in full and that Morgan had sold the property to Houston in the meantime.

⁵ Deborah Cox, archivist at Nashville Metro Archives, personal communication with author, (28 August 2012); *Nashville Business Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Smith, Camp and Co., 1857), 34.

⁶ *Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee*. book 42, page 100.

In any case, once constructed, the building was part of a district that had been primarily commercial in nature since the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Originally the majority of the businesses that set up shop on this part of the street dealt in furniture, hardware, feed, and grain. City directories indicate that by the early-twentieth century, there were also several grocery stores, barbers, and pawnbrokers on the 400 block of Broadway, along with at least one hotel, a restaurant, a watchmaker, and shoemaker.⁸

Prior to its becoming Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, 422 Broadway is listed in the Nashville City Directory as a pawnbroker's shop (1910), "Stein Morris Dry Goods" (1930s and 40s), and Bob's Bicycle and Sporting Goods Shop (1950).⁹ In 1951 Cathey Paint & Wallpaper was at the address; in 1953, it was the "Broadway Hosiery Company," and a year later the listing had changed again to "John and Louise Café Restaurant" which is how it remained until 1959-60.¹⁰ This business was referred to locally as "Mom's."¹¹ According to city directories, the property then enjoyed a brief stint as "Bill's Place Restaurant" but in 1960, it became "Tootsie's."¹²

The use of the premises for various refreshment businesses from the 1950s onwards - i.e. Mom's, Bill's Place and then Tootsie's - probably relates to the fact that from 1943 the very popular country music radio show the *Grand Ole Opry* was broadcast from the Ryman Auditorium.¹³ The Ryman is only half a block north of the 400 block of Broadway and the success of the show drew both performers and their fans to the area, and this in turn led to businesses that catered to their interests and needs appearing nearby. Those needs included places to get refreshment and, in the case of the *Opry* performers specifically, spend time between sets since the Ryman in that era had no dressing rooms and scant backstage facilities. Since only an alleyway separates the buildings on the north side of the 400 block of Broadway and the south elevation of Ryman Auditorium (which is where its stage door is located), passage between the Ryman and the back entrance of 422 Broadway was quick and easy.

The name "Tootsie's" was taken from its owner, Mrs. Hattie Louise "Tootsie" Bess. Bess came from Hohenwald, Tennessee. When she initially took over the lease at 422 Broadway in March 1960, she did so with her husband, "Big Jeff" Bess. Big Jeff was a country singer well known in Nashville. Mrs. Bess also had some experience as a performer and during the fifties the couple operated a string of nightclubs together including "Big Jeff's Country Club" on Franklin Road and an earlier incarnation of

⁷ 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).

⁸ *Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Marshall, Bruce, Polk and Company, 1910), 1080.

⁹ *Nashville City Directory* (1910), 1080. The directory also shows that "John W Mangrum, barber, Mrs. Mary Mangrum" were at 422½ Broadway. According to the 1897 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* (Nashville, TN, volume 1 sheet 1), 422½ was a small structure towards the north end (rear) of the property lot. It is not extant. *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: R. L. Polk and Co., 1930), 1185; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1938), 1029; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (St Louis, Missouri: R. L. Polk and Co., 1940), 1058; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1950), 1149.

¹⁰ *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1951), 1164; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1953), 1092; *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1954), 125.

¹¹ Daniel Cooper, "Tootsie's Orchid Lounge," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 541.

¹² *Polk's Nashville City Directory* (1959-60), 101; Cooper, 541.

¹³ *Ryman Auditorium Timeline*. <http://www.ryman.com/history/> (accessed July 6, 2012).

“Tootsie’s” on the Clarksville Highway.¹⁴ However, the couple separated soon after opening their Broadway bar and Bess continued to run it on her own following their divorce.¹⁵ She initially named the place simply “Tootsie’s” but it became “Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge” in the mid-1960s after a decorator charged with painting the exterior came up with a striking purple color by mixing some leftover paints together.¹⁶

Mrs. Bess ran her honkytonk throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, during which time it was very popular with musicians, songwriters, and their fans. Bess designated the first floor mezzanine at the rear of the building an “industry only” space and it was set aside for musicians.¹⁷ Those known or reputed to have frequented the place include Patsy Cline, Faron Young, Webb Pierce, Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson. Bess also created a performance space where up-coming singer-songwriters, such as the young Willie Nelson, could give renditions of their songs.¹⁸ The second story served as a boarding house for struggling performers and songwriters.

According to regular customer and songwriter Hank Cochran (who co-wrote the Patsy Cline hit “She’s Got You”), the place was always full of musicians to whom Bess displayed a benevolent attitude, allowing them to drink beer and eat food on account until they got paid.¹⁹ Some even wrote pieces that referred to the bar, as in the case, for example, “Dream Me Home” by Mac Davis.²⁰ In a 1967 interview, Bess is recorded as saying:

I don’t know what these musicians would do if I ever took a vacation. They act hurt every time I even stay closed on Sunday. I threatened once to sell out and they said if I did, they’d move out to my house. So I kept the place in self-defense.²¹

Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge gained increasing renown for its musical associations and began to be featured in articles nationally and internationally. In one such essay, published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1968, Larry L. King described Bess as being “a girthy aproned

¹⁴ Jewly Hight, “How Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge Helped Change Country Music and Nashville, in Just 50 Years,” *Nashville Scene*, 4 November 2010, <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/how-Tootsie’s-orchid-lounge-helped-change-country-music-and-nashville-in-just-50-years/Content?oid=1919387> (accessed July 12, 2012).

¹⁵ Martin Hawkins, *A Shot in the Dark: Making Records in Nashville, 1945-55* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 2007), 174.

¹⁶ Hight; *Nashville City Directory* (New York: Marshall, Bruce, Polk, 1966), 138.

¹⁷ Hight.

¹⁸ Michael Kosser, *How Nashville Became Music City, USA: Fifty Years of Music Row* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 73

¹⁹ Kosser, 73

²⁰ “Dream Me Home” contains the following lyric:

Well, it’s two A.M. in Nashville, midnight in L.A.
You’re asleep and I’m out on the road.
And I know you can’t hear me, but I’m talkin’ anyway
It helps me kill some time and ease the load.
Hon, the man didn’t like my songs and he sent me on my way
And I blew my bus fare home in Tootsie’s bar.
Now I’m out on Murfreesboro Road, hitchhiking to L.A.
And the rain pourin’ down on my guitar.

Accessed via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3FS7Hca-cg> August 22, 2012.

²¹ “Tootsie Bess, a friend to Opry Stars, Is Dead,” *Chattanooga Times*, 19 February 1979, A-18.

woman of indefinite years and a plain-as-mud hair style” and of her eponymous bar, he wrote that it had a main room with:

...rickety booths and tables, a counter with stools, a jukebox with an overactive thyroid, beer cases stacked head-high, iron curtains of smoke, cowboys in trick pants and waitresses who consider a food order a personal affront. On the walls are yellowed photographs of everyone who has ever played a guitar. Near a homemade sign that reads NO BEER TABS FOR NO BODY – POLICE ORDERS, were three cigar boxes overflowing with beer tabs.²²

Business at Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge suffered when the *Grand Ole Opry* show moved out of the Ryman Auditorium in 1974. Bess is recorded as saying “They ran off and left me, I didn’t go off and leave them.”²³ By that time, the character of lower Broadway had also changed and many of the buildings were occupied by adult movie-houses and peep shows. Nonetheless, Bess continued to run Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge until her death in 1978.

Since then the bar has continued to function under the same name though it has changed hands a number of times and suffered several temporary closures. Its fortunes are very much tied to those of lower Broadway more generally. At one point in the late 1980s, the Opry Development Committee campaigned to tear it down and rebuild it in a “better” neighborhood.²⁴ Their plan was not successful. In 1994, the building underwent a renovation, which included the stripping of mauve paint, repairs to bricks and to the galvanized metal work, and the subsequent repainting of the building in its distinctive purple color.²⁵ Meanwhile, a downtown revitalization program was put in place by the Metro Development and Housing Agency and other organizations. Among its aims were to bring more diversity to the nature of the businesses operating on lower Broadway (i.e. reduce the number related to adult entertainment) and develop the street as a historic district.²⁶ Thanks to this, and to the 2001 relocation of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum to a nearby site, 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, Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge survives as a popular tourist spot. Since the mid-1990s, it has also been “a flash point for an underground, roots-orientated country music scene.”²⁷

There currently exist two further branches of Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge - one at Nashville’s main airport and one in Panama City, Florida.²⁸

²² Larry L. King, “The Grand Ole Opry,” *Harper’s Magazine* (July 1968): 45.

²³ “‘Orchid Lounge’ Owner ‘Tootsie’ Bess Dies; Befriended Would-Be County Music Stars,” *Kingsport Times News*, 19 February 1978, 5-A.

²⁴ Susan Kissir, “Honky-tonk Lady: Tootsie’s lives on as a country music shrine in the guise of a dive,” *Tennessee Illustrated* (May-June 1988): 8.

²⁵ Mark Ippolito, “Toot-toot Tootsie’s ... hello! The Orchid Lounge is getting a face lift,” *The Tennessean*, 7 August 1994, np.

²⁶ Bill Hudgins, “Lower Broad can be transformed: study,” *Nashville Banner*, 17 December 1982, np.

²⁷ Cooper, 541.

²⁸ Tootsie's Orchid Lounge website, <http://www.tootsies.net/> (accessed July 28, 2012).

Sources: Published Sources and Reports

Cooper, Daniel. "Tootsie's Orchid Lounge." In *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*. ed. Paul Kingsbury, 541. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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

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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.

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, Historic Nashville Inc. downtown survey, clippings files, maps, photo archives and microfilms.

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

Websites

Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. <http://www.tootsies.net/>.

Ryman Auditorium website. <http://www.ryman.com/>.

Historian: Rachel Hopkin, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2012

Project

Information: Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of Tootsie's Orchid Lounge 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 Deborah Cox (Archivist, Nashville Metro Archives), Robert Oermann (journalist and writer) John Rumble (Senior Historian, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum) and Eileen Starr is gratefully acknowledged.



Figure 1: Tootsie's Orchid Lounge.
Source: Photograph by author, 19 July 2012.