

Historic RCA Studio B, 'home of 1,000 Hits,' turns 60

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Clarification: The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum started giving tours of Studio B shortly after it closed in 1977. The studio was donated to the museum in 1992, and in 2002 the Mike Curb Family Foundation purchased Studio B and leased it to the museum in perpetuity.

The RCA Studio B building on the corner of 17th Avenue South and Hawkins Street didn't look particularly flashy when it opened on Oct. 29, 1957.

But for two decades, artists like Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, Chet Atkins, the Everly Brothers, Charley Pride, Waylon Jennings, Jim Reeves and Hank Snow made unforgettable recordings — songs that would become the soundtrack for countless lives — behind its nondescript walls.

Sixty years later, Studio B stands on the corner of Music Square West and Roy Acuff Place. The unassuming building hasn't moved. Nashville changed around it, right down to the street names.

When it opened, the studio — located on what would become Music Row — was "equipped with the latest innovations in sound equipment," according to a 1957 Tennessean article. The facility spawned other innovations as well.



(Photo: George Barker / The Tennessean)



Jim Reeves recording his Christmas album in RCA Studio B in 1962.

Behind the board, Atkins, who ran RCA's Nashville operation, produced hundreds of hits and helped usher in the lush, sophisticated Nashville Sound. Neal Matthews Jr. of the Jordanaires (the vocal group that sang on many of the 200-plus songs Presley recorded at Studio B) began using numbers as shorthand for songs' chord structure; the Nashville Number System is now ubiquitous in recording sessions.

More than 35,000 recordings were made at RCA B, and as the recording industry in Nashville flourished, the facility became a favorite for many artists.

'Like a dance'

"The sound here just seems to hug you," country singer Connie Smith said. In 1964, she recorded her first single, "Once a Day," at Studio B. That chart-topper launched a legendary career, and over the next nine years, Smith recorded a number of subsequent hits in that room.

Sitting in the control room one recent afternoon, she added that the studio's small size made it ideal for recording: "The musicians were all close and we could communicate with our eyes. When I'd sing, my voice would go out and I could tell what was happening by how it hit the walls. I could control what I was doing; other studios are so big that it disappears."

Smith returned to Studio B in 2011 to make her album "Long Line of Heartaches." It had been years since she'd worked there, but as soon as she walked in, it felt "like coming home."

Recording at Studio B was "like a dance," said pedal steel virtuoso Lloyd Green, who spent countless hours there backing artists like Charley Pride and Johnny Paycheck. "Tempos would change because we didn't use click tracks in those days. The changes were so subtle that you didn't pick it up consciously, but subconsciously you felt this swing. That's one of the magical things about this room."

'Being a part of history'

RCA Studio B closed its doors on Aug. 17, 1977. It was donated to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in 1992. These days, the studio hosts a variety of school groups and educational programs.

Tours are also held daily. Music fans from around the world visit Studio B to see where their favorite songs were created. "People will sing along," said studio manager Justin Croft. "They dance, sometimes they kiss, sometimes they cry. It's pretty awesome."

Only a handful of artists have recorded at the famed studio in recent years. Says Croft, "They have to meet certain criteria. Usually (the project) has some tie-back to the history of the studio or some educational purpose."

Rock 'n' roller JD McPherson is the latest to do so. To make new album "Undivided Heart and Soul," he and his band loaded in their gear every afternoon when the tourists left, recorded well into the night, and then hauled all of their equipment back out so that the room would be ready for the morning tour groups.

"I think for some bands that might have been over the line," he said with a laugh. "But for us, just being given the keys to Studio B was more than a dream come true. It was like being a part of history."

Songs recorded at Studio B include:

Bobby Bare, "Detroit City"
The Browns, "The Three Bells"
Rosemary Clooney, "I Really Don't Want to Know"
Skeeter Davis, "The End of the World"
The Everly Brothers, "All I Have to Do is Dream"
Don Gibson, "Oh Lonesome Me"
John Hartford, "Gentle on My Mind"

Waylon Jennings, "Stop the World (And Let Me Off)"
Roy Orbison, "Only the Lonely"
Dolly Parton, "Coat of Many Colors"
Elvis Presley, "Are You Lonesome Tonight"
Boots Randolph, "Yakety Sax"
Connie Smith, "Once a Day"
Porter Wagoner, "Green, Green Grass of Home"

