Making the Scene: An Investigation of the Rock and Roll Scenes of Nashville, Tennessee, and Athens, Georgia

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MAKING THE SCENE:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ROCK AND ROLL SCENES OF NASHVILLE,
TENNESSEE, AND ATHENS, GEORGIA

A Thesis
Presented to
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Master of Folk Studies

By
Kevin Jones Murphy

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MAKING THE SCENE:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ROCK AND ROLL SCENES OF NASHVILLE,
TENNESSEE, AND ATHENS, GEORGIA

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Making the Scene: An Investigation of the Rock and Roll Scenes of Nashville, Tennessee, and Athens, Georgia, takes a look at the ways in which both the identities of a music scene and the individuals taking part in that scene are created and maintained. Issues of identity are addressed by examining the roles performed by various members of the scene (musicians, soundmen, club owners, etc.), by focusing on the influence of landscape, and looking at the ways a scene’s members identify with the cultural region that surrounds their particular scene (in this case both scenes are located in the American South).

Data for this thesis was gathered in two ways: through traditional, ethnographic interview with musicians from Athens, and Nashville, and from the author’s personal experience as a member of the Nashville rock Scene from 1990 to 2001. Secondary sources were also consulted.

Having analyzed the data, the author concludes that the scene is a function of culture; it is created and sustained through personal interaction and cultural imagination—individuals create and sustain it. Once it is created, once it is constructed, and named, the scene has an affect on
the individuals that come to take part in it. It helps to shape their identities. Individuals, however, continue to exert influence over the scene, constantly altering its character.
Preface:


The following work focuses on the music communities of two cities: Nashville, Tennessee, and Athens, Georgia. As a matter of orientation, I provide the following biographical sketches of both cities and the musicians interviewed for this work.

Athens, Georgia

Athens, population 101,489, is the home of the University of Georgia. It is located about an hour outside of the state’s capital, Atlanta. Surrounded by sleepy old whistle stop communities and acres of farmland, Athens seemed, as Richie Unterberger states in Music USA: The Rough Guide, “an unlikely breeding ground for some of the most popular new-wave and post-punk groups of the late 1970s and early 1980s” (1999:133). And yet the city did play host to an exciting and vibrant music scene. Acts such as the B-52’s, R.E.M., Pylon, and Love Tractor, drew national attention to Athens. Since then, musicians have flocked to Athens to become a part of its scene. Consequently, the number of bands in the city grew from just a handful in the 1970s to over four hundred in 2004.

Athens has hosted a variety of bands performing a variety of musical styles. I provide a brief timeline here for further orientation (Note, this is for orientation only. No hard and fast lines may be drawn between stylistic periods. There is considerable overlap between the genres): Late 70’s Early 80s—The scene begins to form. Bands: Pylon, Love Tractor, R.E.M. and the B-52’s. Mid-80s—they come from all over. Bands recognize the worth of the Athens brand and move to Athens. Late 80s, early 90s—The rise of the Jam-band (acts that rely heavily
on improvisation and extended musical breaks). Widespread Panic is central to the scene. Non-Jam bands like 5’8”, and solo artists such as Vic Chestnut are also popular. Late 90s, early 2000—avant-garde acts such as the Elephant 6 collective and Michael gain popularity and influence, rise of the Drive-by Truckers.

**Nashville, Tennessee**

Nashville, population 488,374, is the capital of Tennessee. Well within the “bible belt,” it is home to a large Christian publishing industry. It also supports a significant Christian music community, and is home to many Contemporary Christian recording artists and record labels.

Nashville is probably best known, however, for country music. It is the home of the Grand Ole Opry, and has counted as its residents such country greats as Ernest Tubb, George Jones, and Patsy Cline. Nashville views itself as the home of country music. (Whether this is true is a matter of debate. There were many radio shows similar to the Grand Ole Opry, many sites, which were just as significant to the development of country music. Nashville seems to have done the best job of promoting itself as such.) But Nashville is no stranger to rock and roll. According to Unterberger, “There have always been rock sessions in Nashville: its central Southern location, and burgeoning reputation for state-of-the-art equipment and professional musicianship, made sure that it wasn’t used solely by country artists” (1999:111). Today, Nashville shelters a significant number of rock musicians. Among those who have achieved a significant level of success are Bobby Bare Jr., Josh Rouse, and the band Lambchop.
The Musicians

The following study depends on information collected by means of ethnographic interview with musicians from Nashville and Athens, and on the use of my own memories as a member of the Nashville scene. The following passages provide brief biographical sketches of those interviewed while highlighting their connections to their respective scenes. For more information on artists listed below, please refer to their websites listed in the bibliography.

**Tommy Womack:** Tommy Womack grew up in Madisonville, Kentucky, where he dreamed of forming a rock and roll band (Womack 1995:xv-xvii). His Bowling Green, Kentucky based band Government Cheese achieved moderate regional success. In the 1990s he was a member of the Nashville band the Bis-quits (a band that included guitarist Mike “Grimey” Grimes—see below.)

Womack now performs as a solo act. He is also author of the book *Cheese Chronicles: The True Story of a Rock ‘n’ Roll Band You’ve Never Heard Of.* Womack lives and works in Nashville where he attends church with David Henry.

**David Henry:** David Henry is from Macon, Georgia. He grew up playing music (classical and rock) with his brothers and currently lives in Nashville where he is one half of the duo Brother Henry. (The other half, incidentally, is his identical twin, Ned Henry.)

Henry lived in Athens before moving to Nashville. There he acted as a second engineer in John Keene’s recording studio. He worked on records for acts such as
R.E.M. and the Cowboy Junkies. After the recording the Junkies he was asked to go on tour with them as a cellist.

Henry also owns and operates a Nashville recording studio that has played host to a number of local Nashville acts. When Brother Henry performs they often enlist the services of drummer, Park Ellis.

**Park Ellis:** Park Ellis came to Nashville from Marietta, Georgia to attend Belmont University. He is a singer-songwriter, and a percussionist. Ellis is a great supporter of the early shows—smoke-free concerts that begin at 8:00 pm—at the Nashville venue, The Basement, a venue that is occasionally booked by Mike Grimes. Ellis, now in his mid-thirties, views music as more of a sideline than a career. He is currently in pursuit of a job in education.

**Mike “Grimey” Grimes:** Originally from Owensboro, Kentucky, Grimey is something of a scene unto himself. He is a guitarist—he played with the Bis-Quits, and Bare Jr. among others. He owned and booked a highly successful Nashville nightclub, The Slow Bar—a night club that helped sustain the scene at the turn of the new millennium. He also owns and operates a local record store, Grimey’s records. Grimey is a staunch advocate for Nashville’s rock scene.

**Paul Butchart:** Butchart is a long-time Athens resident, and member of the original Athens scene. He is best known as the drummer for the band the Side Effects. The Side Effects opened for R.E.M. at their first show. Butchart is now known amongst members
of that early Athens scene as the scene’s “archivist.” He holds an extensive collection of fliers and show posters documenting the bands that called Athens home and the places they performed. Butchart also conducts a walking tour of Athens in which he points out the scene’s significant sites and relates its history.

**Patterson Hood**: Patterson Hood is a member of the popular Southern act The Drive-By Truckers. Hood performed with the band Adam’s House Cat in the mid to late 1980s. When Adam’s House Cat called it quits Hood (then in his early thirties) moved to Athens from Alabama and worked as a soundman at both the High Hat and The 40-Watt clubs. He still calls Athens home today.

**Bob Sleppy**: Bob Sleppy played drums for the Athens based band Michael. He is now the director of the not-for-profit Nuci’s Space, a center for Athens’ musicians that provides counseling, health insurance, rehearsal space, and a performance venue. Bob is from my hometown, Cumming, Georgia. We lived across the street from each other. We played in a high school rock band together. After graduating high school, he went to Athens. I went to Nashville.

**Kevin Murphy**: As mentioned above, I am from Cumming, Georgia. I played in a band called The Lounge Flounders in Nashville from 1990 until 1998. The original lineup of the band included Sean Kelly on Guitar, Chip Jordan (a friend of mine since we were in first grade) on drums, and original bassist, Tom Bredesen. I wrote songs, sang them, and played rhythm guitar. The band’s membership stayed virtually unchanged except for the
bassist. Bredesen left the band in 1992 and was ultimately replaced by Nashville native, Clay Steakley.

The band achieved a moderate level of success. We signed to Mercury Records in 1995, put out a record in ‘96, lost our record contract, and disbanded shortly thereafter. In 1997 Jordan, Steakley, and I formed the band Canebrake Quartet. The band was a three-piece that featured a rotating roster of support musicians, including Park Ellis, and David and Ned Henry. Canebrake disbanded in 2001. I am now a graduate student, training to become a folklorist.
Introduction

Scene. The word brings to mind several concepts, several images. A scene can be a section of a play, a fictional slice of life performed before an audience. It can be a disturbance, an outbreak of emotion that draws attention. It can be a background, a place, or a setting. Presented aurally, the word suggests further meaning. Its homonym, “seen,” adds an extra layer of depth to the term “scene.” Stated simply: a scene is seen. A scene is also a place to be seen.

The word scene is not, however, restricted to a single concept. It can combine all of the above-mentioned elements. One word may represent, or conjure the image of, several types of scenes. This combined type, this scene that consists of many scenes, is the type with which I will deal in the following pages.

I will be examining local music scenes. Usually modified by a city’s name (as in the Nashville, or Athens Scene), a local music scene provides place, a background, for the creation and performance of music. The scene centers on this expressive act. The performances, taking place in nightclubs, on city streets, or in recording studios, are recognizable, and repeatable. These performances can often be theatrical, and some can resemble an emotional outbreak or disturbance. But there is more to a local music scene than a city and its performing musicians.

A local music scene consists of a network of individuals. As Randy McNutt suggests in his book Guitar Towns, a music scene (he uses the term “regional music system”) also contains “arrangers, recording engineers, songwriters, music publishers,
I would add to McNutt’s list: club owners, soundmen, independent record storeowners, the local press, as well as those individuals who appreciate the music. These individuals share texts, codes and other expressive forms that relate to the scene’s center—the performance, the music. They come together to form a unique cultural group, a group that possesses its own idea of itself, its own identity.

Folklorists and ethnographers have always written about and described scenes of one type or another. In fact, the prevalent definition of folklore describes a scene in its most generic sense. When Dan Ben-Amos’s defines folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” he is, in a sense, describing a scene (1972:13). A scene consists of a group of people interacting, and communicating. The group deals with, evaluates, and sometimes creates, a common subject matter for which they develop a specialized language.

Folklorist Linda Dégh describes such a group in her book Folk Tales and Society: Story-Telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community (1989). Dégh presents a scene in which a particular group of storytellers, the Hungarian Szeklers, interact. She describes the ways in which region, landscape, and audience influence and effect storytellers and their repertoire. She describes how storytellers influence and inspire one another. She describes the mechanism. She describes the individuals. She describes a scene.

Other folklorists have investigated different types of scenes. In Chaseworld Mary Hufford describes and evaluates interaction amongst fox hunters in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey (1992). In her work Hufford describes the scene’s setting, the forest of the
Pinelands National Reserve; she describes and dissects the foxhunters’ conversations and personal interactions; and she describes the way in which the world of the foxhunt, the “Chaseworld,” is called into existence away from the actual event through those conversations and reminiscences.

Sabina Magliocco discusses Neo-Pagans and their aesthetic expressions in *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars: Making Things Whole* (2001). Magliocco presents several groups of neo-pagans and describes the ways they express unity and group affiliation through art, dress, and gatherings. She too deals with a scene.

All of these scholars, while describing the various aspects of their respective scenes, are also dealing with issues of identity. What makes Group A stand apart from Group B? How do these groups define themselves? What is different about them? How do they view the world?

This aspect of identity is what fascinates me most—the way it is constructed, construed, revealed and maintained amongst participants of particular music scenes. Musicians shape regional music scenes. They help define the scene’s sound and attitude, its fashions, and its slang. At the same time an established scene (consisting of the place and the list of players mentioned above) shapes the identities of individual musicians. Musicians give a scene its content: its music, and performances. The scene gives musicians an infrastructure: a place to perform, record, advertise, sell, and talk about their music. The elements interact, sometimes peacefully, and sometimes with great tension. But either way, they affect the identity of the other.

Musicians either conform to, or react against, an established scene’s identity. In some cases the musicians actively seek out a scene’s identity. Often bands and
individuals will relocate simply to be “branded” (here I mean branded in the sense of
given a brand name) by a particular scene. They change locations in order to have a
particular city’s name proceed, and modify their own. (“From Nashville Tennessee, it’s
The Lounge Flounders; or, tonight we proudly present Athens Georgia’s own: Michael!) This branding can validate a musician’s identity. It can grant them place and purpose. It
also, to a certain extent, lets the musician’s, or band’s, audience know what to expect. If
the audience is familiar with a region’s particular sound, or style of music, and they
notice that region’s name on an advertisement, they may come into a venue with
preconceived notions of how that band should sound, how its music should be played.
This can end either positively, with a pleased and enthusiastic audience validating the
musician’s identity and purpose, or negatively, with a disappointed crowd, leaving the
musician depressed and despondent.¹

The rock scene of Nashville, Tennessee, is a particularly interesting example of a
local music scene. The brand name “Nashville” is not one that immediately inspires
visions of rock and roll. And yet, there is a vibrant rock scene that exists alongside
Nashville’s better-known country music scene.²

Tension exists between the country scene and the local rock scene. This tension
serves to shape identity. Some musicians go out of their way to prove just how un-
Nashville (meaning not country) they are. But there is also a great deal of interplay.
Many accomplished Nashville musicians use the presence of the country scene to their
economic advantage. They play “money-gigs” with country (or contemporary Christian)
artists while they pursue their own careers in the arena of rock.
There is another interesting example of a music scene in the Southern United States that bears mention here, a rock scene that possesses an identity quite different from Nashville’s: Athens, Georgia. Athens’s rock scene does not have to contend with another, more dominant music industry. As such, I feel that it can serve as an interesting foil, an interesting counterpoint to my description of the Nashville scene.

The question, however, remains: How does one go about describing a scene’s relation to personal identity? As mentioned above, many folklorists deal with issues of identity when they describe and define various cultural groups. It is a subject covered since the discipline’s infancy. Johann Gottfried Herder, the man, as Regina Bendix reports in her book *In Search of Authenticity*, responsible for “[solidifying] the modern invention of the ‘folk’ category,” dealt with identity as expressed through “folk poetry,” the artistic language of the common man (1997:35-41). Epics, such as the Finnish Kalevala, have been assembled (and subsequently dissected and studied) for the purpose of uniting people, to help establish or reinforce group/national identity (1997:72). Hufford’s description of the foxhunters, Dégh’s work with storytellers, and Magliocco’s tales of neo-pagans all deal with varying aspects of group identity. It is a subject that has been well covered.

The problem, for me, comes in relating and describing how group identity affects personal identity. Although personal identity is not completely an internal phenomenon, it is difficult to fully describe and ascertain. How do you truly get into the head of another person? How do you gather enough information to be able to say that you have found the essence of his or her identity? I believe that that essence may never be fully ascertained.
There are, however, ways of dealing with, of discussing, the formation of personal identity. It is not, as stated above, all contained within the mind of the individual. Nor is it within the complete control of the individual. Outside forces help to shape and form personal identity. Cultural groups to which individuals belong plays a large part in the shaping of identity. As with group identity, there are the somewhat obvious outward aesthetic manifestations of personal identity: dress, stylized language, musical style, and images that represent bands, such as album and poster art. All of these items will get some attention. But there is, I believe, another way to get inside the scene, another way to find out how it functions to create personal identity. I plan to accomplish this through the use of my own personal experience narrative.

In her book *Monuments and Memory* Martha Norkunas provides an ethnographic model in which personal experience constitutes a major portion of the book’s research. As she states, “My own memory . . . is the raw data of an ethnography that describes the culture of Lowell and sets the context for understanding the monuments” (2002:10). Norkunas mines her memory for ethnographic data. She then uses that data to provide evidence and context for her scholarly work. This approach, as she admits, is not without its detractors; but Norkunas eloquently defends her position:

It is controversial: does the “I” belong so strongly in an intellectual work? I think it does, in certain instances, when the writer is inextricably linked to a place over periods of time, where roots run deep, and when experience so informs all that the writer sees that there can be no observation apart form it. Maintaining the “I” also allowed me to examine the dialectic between insider and outsider, which is a strong undercurrent throughout this work. Who has the authority to speak in public is a question constantly posed by the monuments. Who has the authority to reconstruct history, to decide local cultural issues, or to claim knowledge derived from insider status are issues I lived with daily when I worked at the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission. (2002:10)
As Norkunas’s life is “inextricably linked” to the history of Lowell, Massachusetts, so is my life undeniably intertwined with the Nashville Rock scene. I cannot remove myself from the discussion. I can not pretend to be a bystander; I cannot put on the airs of an objective observer. I was there. The Nashville rock scene is a part of me.

Norkunas’s use of the “I” in her book did more than add an extra layer of authority to her presentation, it provided an entrance into the world of Lowell. Her description of her family’s life and history in the city is highly evocative. It reconstructs the Lowell of the past and allows the reader to step inside. It gives them access to a place they would have been denied had Norkunas taken on the role of objective observer. It allows the reader to form a personal connection with Norkunas’s family and, in turn, with Lowell.

Mary Hufford, in her book *Chaseworld*, might refer to this presentation of personal experience as the opening of enclave. An enclave is a portal to another world. “The enclave, anchored in one space and time opens onto a reality anchored in another space and time” (1992:8). It is a conceptual space anchored in the every-day world that opens up to another world, a world constituted by speech, memory, and experience, a “story realm” (8). In *Chaseworld*, the foxhunters’ conversations open up the world of the foxhunt—the chase (e.g., “chaseworld”). Their speech evokes another time and space. They inhabit the Pine Barrens and the foxhunt through symbolic conversation—symbolic conversion. A world is created through talk. It can be summoned at the dinner table, in the living room, in lodges, or pool halls. A door to the chaseworld can be opened anywhere the foxhunters get together to talk foxhunting.
The same principle is employed by Norkunas when she presents her personal memories of Lowell. She opens a doorway and allows us to enter her world. We are provided with a means of personal connection. And, if we choose to accept it, if we choose to go willingly with Norkunas, our understanding of Lowell is enriched.

I believe that Norkunas’s approach is well suited to what I am attempting to accomplish in this paper. I spent twelve years negotiating Nashville’s rock scene as a musician. And while I may not be able to faithfully describe the ways in which that process of negotiation truly shapes and affects another musician’s personal identity, I can certainly attest to my own. The best way for me to go about this is to talk my way back. I can open up an enclave and describe the scene (and the process) from the inside. This will necessitate something of a leap for this is not a typical scholarly work. I will have to rely upon a great deal of my own memory, impressionistic language, and some techniques better suited to writers of fiction.

I do, however, find this technique justified—and not all together novel. In addition to Norkunas’s argument for inserting the “I” into ethnography, there are a great deal of postmodernist trends and manifestos that refer to all ethnographic works as types of fiction—or rather a process of fiction-ing. It is a process that results in a representation, a conglomeration of compressed events standing for the actual real-time unfolding of history. The act of recording and re-presenting an historic event inherently fictionalizes it. (Clifford 1986:100) An attempt to reconstruct the authentic only further removes us from the actual, authentic event (Bendix 1997:7).

With this in mind, I present, or rather recreate, my experience. For even if it contains fictional elements, I do believe it contains functional truths—truths worthy of
examination. I do not mean to suggest that these truths are absolute or universal as that would be at odds with the postmodernism I use as justification. Rather, these truths are relative and experiential.

I do not, however, rely solely upon my own experience. I rely heavily upon information I gathered through the more conventional means of the ethnographic interview. These interviews, conducted with members of both the Nashville and Athens scenes, provide multiple perspectives on multiple aspects of both scenes. The interviewees’ statements reinforce, further illustrate, or contradict my experiences. Again, even when in direct opposition to my own or other commentators’ experiences, these anecdotes and commentaries represent personally constituted truths. They represent the experience of the individual.

The gathering of this information proved interesting. It presented several methodological circumstances that I should address here. As stated above, I used two types of primary research for this project, interview and my own experience as a working rock musician in Nashville. This combination presents me with something of a quandary: How do I interview fellow musicians, as a musician, and obtain the fullest possible responses without the benefit of what many folklorists refer to as “the stranger effect?” The stranger effect refers to instances during ethnographic interviews in which outsider status is beneficial. Sometimes you are able to elicit more information if you are not an insider. Sometimes, if you are an outsider, the people you interview will take greater care to explain the things that an insider might already understand or take for granted. I wanted, in this instance, to be responded to as if I knew nothing of the subject at hand.
When interviewing friends and former colleagues, it was all but impossible to
downplay my identity as a former member of the Nashville rock community. I did,
however, attempt to ask questions from the point of view of an outsider. That seemed to
bring some distance to the process. It felt silly at times—asking friends questions they
knew I had an answer for, or experience with. Other times the interview process just took
over—each person slipping fully into their prescribed roles—and they hardly seemed to
realize. (This can be stressful as well. I felt tempted at times to remind certain
interviewees that we had in fact played music together, feeling as if they had forgotten
my role in the process all together.)

In one instance I asked an old musician friend whether he found himself playing
music with other musicians just for fun, for their own entertainment. He began his
answer casually, and then paused. Stammering, and somewhat annoyed, he said, “Wait a
minute. You know. You’ve been there. You played with us.” I had to admit to him that
I was playing dumb in an attempt to elicit the fullest answers possible.

I experienced similar problems with musicians I did not know. On the one hand,
it was easier to present my questions with an outsider’s perspective. These interviewees
might have some clue that I used to play music professionally (I certainly did not
intentionally mislead or completely obscure the fact). I usually secured an introduction
with these people due to my former involvement in the music business. But once the
interview began, I tried to keep my experiences to myself.

At times I was tempted to add my personal experience into the interview. But I
resisted. “There will be time for that in the writing of the thesis,” I thought. Again, I
wanted the interviewees to answer in the fullest manner possible. I did not want them to
short change their responses because they thought I already knew what they were talking about.

This brings about the question: might I have gotten more if I shared those experiences? For instance, I interviewed an Athens musician who worked as a soundman for a time. He happened to run monitors at the 40-Watt club in 1996, the same time my band, *The Lounge Flounders*, made an appearance there. I asked him about his experiences as a soundman, how they affected his views on the Athens scene. He gave me a generic answer. He heard many terrible bands, and dealt with over-blown egos and attitudes. It might have left him somewhat jaded; but, for the most part, the people were nice (Hood 2004).

Now, as the opening act for the group Evan and Jared in 1996, we encountered some over-blown egos ourselves. We faced a specific incident at the 40-Watt and a kindly soundman helped us deal with it. Could the two men be the same? I certainly believe they could. But I did not bring it up.

Another interview with a Nashville record storeowner found me staring directly at my band’s album. I let my gaze wander during a pause in our conversation—just to collect my thoughts—and there it was, right there in the local section. A smile flashed quickly, and involuntarily across my face—but I did not mention the sighting. I did not mention my connection.

Would the answers I received from these people been significantly different had I made my involvement in the music more evident? In some cases I believe it might have, but to the detriment of the interview as a whole. After all, these were interviews—not conversations.
In any event, my experiences are incorporated into the final project. And I do believe that the information gathered from other musicians fits nicely alongside those reminiscences. In the end, I have reconstructed a type of conversation in which their ideas about music scenes respond to mine, without my ideas directly influencing their responses.

It must be noted, however, that I did not receive information free of coded speech. Some went unnoticed by me. As a former member of the community, I was familiar with the code and had no reason to take notice. For example, musicians have a tendency to convey information by listing band names. To an outsider these lists may be confusing, especially if they are not familiar with the music of the bands and musicians mentioned. But there is substance here. These names can represent genealogies of style and influence. The listing of bands, musicians, and songs conveys a person’s “in” status. It indicates a musician’s influences and acts as a marker for identity.

In fact, your perceived identity—the “you” that others see—is often determined (at least during initial introductions and first impressions) by the particular rock genealogy you subscribe to. What acts do you, as a musician, count as influences? Who are you into now? How do they compare to the old guard? I can’t begin to list the number of friends I’ve made where the conversation hinged upon an artist like Tom Waits or Elvis Costello.

One of the difficulties involved in maintaining identity is that the list is ever expanding. If you fall out of the scene, even for a period as brief as a few months, you find it changed. The local list—the group of musicians currently en vogue at any given time—is in constant flux. The lament, “I’ve been a little out of touch lately,” is often
heard as an apology for not being on top of a scene’s current events, for not being up to
date, for not having access to the current “list” (Ellis 2004).

This work is more about description than theory. I do, however, draw upon
theoretical works, for both the justification of this thesis’s form, and its content. As
mentioned above I rely partly on the works of Mary Hufford and Martha Norkunas to
justify my research methods and my form of presentation.

My discussion of the Nashville and Athens scenes is divided into four chapters.
The first, Anatomy of a Scene, contains a brief discussion regarding the way in which
some scenes come to be. It asks the questions: What makes up a scene? What is the
allure of one scene over another? Why do people gravitate towards particular scenes?

This chapter also addresses the different roles that exist within a scene. As I
stated earlier, a rock scene comprises more than musicians. It is also made up of
audiences, sound technicians, members of the press, record label personnel, etc . . . Many
people take on multiple roles within a scene. Scene-sters taking on multiple roles find
that their perspective of their scene is broadened. This affects their identities as scene
members and affects the influence they hold over the identity of the scene.

In chapter two I take a look at the influence of landscape on a scene. Using
concepts laid out by Kent Ryden in his book Mapping the Invisible Lanscape, I
investigate the impact the Nashville and Athens rock scenes have on their respective
landscapes. Additionally, I discuss some of the ways in which those landscapes shape
both the community of musicians and the music they create.
I will show how the town of Nashville—the scene of the scene—influences identity, both positively and negatively. For instance “The Nashville Curse,” which states that no Nashville based non-country act will achieve success, is one way in which the landscape, both visible and invisible functions as negative influence on Identity. On the other hand, the amount of resources, the infrastructure of Nashville, and its rich musical history affects identity in a positive manner.

In chapter three, a visual interlude, I will present a collection of posters, fliers, album art, and press photos from the Lounge Flounders and Canebrake Quartet. This chapter will demonstrate the ways in which bands and musicians present themselves graphically, and how those presentations contribute to the over-all visual atmosphere of a scene.

In chapter four I will speak of region. Nashville is located in the South. I will speak about what it means to be a Southern rock and roll musician. I will also examine how this distinct region influences the scene and the individuals that compose it. Do these musicians embrace their Southern roots? How does it affect their art? Does the political atmosphere seep into their music?

For my part, I spent a good fifteen years of my life preparing for this paper. And though my objectivity may be questioned (and perhaps it should be, from a post-modern standpoint), I feel as if I have a very good sense of how the scene works. I was nothing if not an observer. Becoming a member, becoming a part of a scene involves a great deal of standing from the outside looking in. Before you are an insider you are an outsider. You either study the code from a safe vantage until you are comfortable with it, and then enter with caution; or, you jump right in and figure it out as you go along. In either
circumstance you must become a keen observer. It is my hope that my observations will provide insight, that I can provide for you an entrance into the rock scenes of Nashville and Athens.
This occurs, of course, on a case-by-case basis. I do not intend to suggest universal response. Some musicians may do quite well, emotionally speaking, when faced with disinterested audiences.

As an illustration of how the modern rock scene in Nashville is often neglected, see the Nashville section of Richie Unterberger’s *Music USA the Rough Guide: A Coast-To-Coast Tour Of American Music: The Artists, The Venues, The Stories, And the Essential Recordings*. With the exception of the listing of certain rock-oriented venues, Nashville’s local rock scene goes mostly unnoticed (97-126).

These are by no means the only two functioning rock scenes in the South. Again, a quick perusal of *Music USA the Rough Guide: A Coast-To-Coast Tour Of American Music: The Artists, The Venues, The Stories, And the Essential Recordings*, will reveal the myriad examples of such scenes that existed in the past as well as those that flourish today.
Chapter 1:

Anatomy of a Scene

The Arrival

From the minute I arrived on the campus of Nashville’s Belmont University I was on guard. I had my ears perked for any news relating to the local rock scene. I wanted to find musicians. I wanted to talk music. I wanted a band and I wanted to play. Academics were purely secondary.

During orientation I spotted a guy wearing a Red Hot Chili Peppers t-shirt. I struck up a conversation.

“So, uh, you like the Peppers huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. This summer all I listened to was ‘Mother’s Milk.’ It was, uh, well, like mother’s milk.”

The boy sneered. “Mother’s Milk is a sell out. ‘Freaky Styley’ is better.”

He stared, letting an uncomfortable silence linger between us.

Okay, I thought, perhaps I should try a different approach.

“Oh . . . Um, what’s the local scene like around here? Many good bands?”

The boy immediately opened up. His expression became more relaxed. He became less guarded, less jaded.
“Man! This scene, well, it’s ready. The underground rock scene is about to burst wide open. It’s about to explode.”

I knew what he meant: things were about to happen for the bands in Nashville. They were poised for national recognition. But my initial image was one of a giant swell beneath the Nashville streets. Ever expanding, a bulge in the pavement rose each time a new rock musician entered the city. All packed in tight, stubbly faces pressed against asphalt, a great tangle of arms, legs and guitar necks writhed and boiled underground.

A fissure appeared in the street above. It grew wider and wider until it released a great plume of steam. The steam shot out accompanied by the ring of a guitar—a single distorted power-chord. Musicians flew from the ground, returned to earth in a shower of long hair and leather. A rain of rockers—a new reign of rock and roll for Music City U.S.A.—America’s home of country music. I would be its newest and most loyal subject.

That vision was somehow tied to my naiveté. I did not yet know just what comprised a local scene. I did not know of the beast that lurked beneath the country crust of Music City.

**Birth of a Scene: The Athens Scene**

How does a local music scene develop? What composes it? What are its salient features and how do those features influence individuals? Conversely, how do individuals influence those features? There are no easy or definite answers to these questions.
Some music scenes develop around individuals. William Ferris, in *Blues From the Delta*, describes such an individual. He tells of how the blues community of Leland, Mississippi grew in the home of bluesman Poppa Jazz:

> In the midst of this scene [Poppa Jazz’s place, his home turned into a night club] the blues community grew like a family with a kinship of love for music and good times shared together. Until his death in 1974, Poppa Jazz was the central figure who held the Leland Family together. As his name suggests, he became a father to aspiring singers. (1978:22)

Sometimes one man can father a scene. A single individual’s influence can create a community, and can bring like-minded individuals together.

Sometimes a scene begins with a group of like-minded individuals seeking out a means of expression. According to Rodger Lyle Brown in his book *Party Out of Bounds* the music scene in Athens, Georgia, was sustained by a group of friends attempting to provide entertainment for one another. As he says, “The members of the bands that played weren’t ambitious rockers: They were just the latest to find out how much fun it was to play pretend with your friends . . . the latest to show that playing pretend is its own reality” (2003:139).

As Brown suggests, the early Athens bands were not full fledged rock stars. They did not have platinum albums decorating their walls, or legions of screaming fans clamoring to catch a glimpse of them. These accoutrements of rock stardom may not have even appealed to them. But when they took the stage to entertain their friends, they acted out the part. They pretended to be rock stars.

This play develops. People are drawn into the game of pretend. They find it entertaining. They want to play too. A scene is born. At this point the scene is an intimate affair—friends gathering together to view repeat performances. Eventually,
others are inspired or encouraged to take the stage. More people gather to take part in the
fun, or to view the spectacle.

Perhaps this is the point at which a scene really begins to take hold, when it
moves beyond the intimate confines of close friends and draws a larger audience—an
audience with expectations. Expectation may just be the key to the formation of a scene,
it may just be the reason that scenes solidify and develop. Audiences expect to arrive at a
certain destination and to be entertained in a certain manner. Musical acts expect an
audience. This is a scene at its simplest level: artists and audience. But the scene’s
development does not end here.

The game becomes more sophisticated. Individual, specialized roles begin to
develop. Say, for instance, that musical performances first take place in someone’s
home. Eventually, as performances are repeated, as the word spreads that something
highly entertaining is taking place at this person’s home, the crowds begin to swell. The
home becomes too small. It can no longer contain the party. The event must be moved.
If the town in which the scene is developing has no venue for this type of performance
then another, larger house may be turned into a make-shift night club (as with the Poppa
Jazz example above), or someone must open a night club or bar. In any case, the scene
becomes more than artist and audience. It expands to include venue, or club,
owners/operators.

That club or venue will need a sound system and someone to operate it. Someone
takes on the role as soundman. The venue may need to draw larger audiences in order to
cover overhead costs, so someone steps into the role of promoter. The local musicians
may wish to play in front of different audiences. They begin to travel out of town. They
find that the logistics of procuring shows, of traveling from place to place, becomes too much of a burden. They ask someone to manage those issues for them.

An infrastructure is formed. (It must be noted that this is merely one scenario. There is no single process by which a scene develops.) Roles are proscribed and defined. The scene moves beyond artist and audience. It now encompasses club owners, soundmen, promoters, press (local, specialized press, such as weekly papers devoted to area entertainment, may develop to handle a promoter’s needs), and managers. Recording studio owners and technicians, and retail outlets that sell their recordings may also enter the scene. A scene matures.

Paul Butchart, one of the original members of the Athens scene, one of the individuals who “played pretend,” describes this scenario when he relates his role in the birth of a scene:

It wasn’t until 1979—October of ’79—that I picked up a . . . Uh, I arranged to have these two guys move in with me. One had a drum set, the other had a guitar and an amp. And me and this other guy, who was [also] my roommate, when those other two guys would leave the house, we’d go downstairs and play with their equipment.

So, I basically learned to drum and then, six months later, played our first show. I never took a lesson or anything. It was just making it up—just trying to do it. Because we had seen Pylon and the B-52’s, and they weren’t trained musicians. So it was just like that.

I didn’t come here with any idea of being a musician in a music scene. There wasn’t one. [When I moved here] there was one band. You know, it was basically a way to have fun—to go see a band, you know. And just hearing the new music, just hearing The Ramones and The Sex Pistols, and the university started having a New Wave radio show. It was called New Wave News. And they started playing all the new music. So we ended up going to the record stores downtown and started buying the records from England, California, and New York . . .

It didn’t start out to be a scene. It was just a way to have fun. You know, it’s just like a party. It’s like, you know it’s hard to say. Basically, it’s like, “Well Pylon [a popular Athens band at the time] is out of town. They’re on the road. We need a new band.” “Well, okay, let’s do a band.” That’s how it happened . . .
The core group of people were about sixty or seventy people who listened to the same type of music. You know, we listened to Devo and The Talking Heads, Roxy Music, David Bowie, and bands like that, as opposed to Boston, and Styx, and Foreigner—“Rumors,” Fleetwood Mac, you know, and all that. We were all listening to the other stuff. We didn’t know each other at first until . . . There weren’t any New Wave shows in Athens really . . . so we’d go to Atlanta to see bands play. And you’d see familiar faces at that. Then we’d go to class the next day and you’d see them on campus. Because we were all students, a lot of us, at the time. I’d say 85% of people in the music scene were going to school. They worked at the radio station. They were up on the new music—this was the new wave scene, you know. So, it just kind of—it was just a way to kill time I guess. The town was a lot smaller. It wasn’t as developed . . . I always said, “I thought it would be our own secret party,” you know . . .

When it started getting big, when people just started moving into town to be musicians in Athens—whereas we were all college students who were just having fun, we didn’t ever want to be musicians because we didn’t take lessons, we just played music, we just made noise—when people started moving to town with the sole purpose of being in a band and being recognized as being from Athens, it kind of lost its mystique and the magic and became more of a . . . You know, the people, the older people like me, who first saw the B’s [The B 52’s] were like: “Well, this is neat, but it’s not—it doesn’t have the same spirit.”

To me, the best bands to ever come out of Athens just pick up their instruments and learned to play. You know, they are not these guys who are in six different bands and can play their instruments so well . . . now a days it’s that way. There’s three bands and they put out albums under three different names, and it’s all the same musicians playing different instruments.

It probably could have happened anywhere. I don’t know why it happened here. It’s hard to say, you know. It just did. Bands would start in Atlanta, then they’d move to Athens because nobody was looking in Atlanta for bands. And then they’d come here . . . and be Athens bands. And then national bands . . . like the Butt hole Surfers even lived here for a while during the mid-eighties.

[But those of us who were here at the beginning,] we share it. It was just magic. It was a magical thing. There was just some kind of energy. I don’t know. It was, like, youth. It may be happening for younger people here now. But whether it is here now I can’t say because there is more of an expectation. Before, you’d go see a band you didn’t know what to expect. Now people go to hear something they are familiar with. (Butchart 2004)
Butchart’s part in the Athens scene begins, as Brown suggests, when he plays pretend. He received no formal training as a drummer. He just wanted to be in a band—to do what the musicians he looked up to were doing. He decided to simply sit down and do it, to go through the motions, in effect, willing himself to become a drummer.

Butchart goes on to say that when there were no bands in town, music fans of Athens would simply step up to form a new one. It was fun for them. And, from Butchart’s description, it seems that it was a period of low stress. He was not worried about expressing great musicianship. He simply played. The bands people played music for fun. They played because they loved it.

Then, as more people began to recognize the fun being had, more people began to crowd around, looking for a piece of that good time. The scene began to solidify. Athens became a destination for musicians searching for a specific identity. Outsiders began to realize that there was magic in that small Southern town.

That magic was created and maintained by those who created the music, and by those who made up the audience for that music: the observers. In other words, even though the scene possessed a physical location, the city of Athens, it was truly maintained by, and between, the people. The scene is the culture. The culture is the scene. The magic was born of interpersonal interaction, from a connection between artist and audience. It was sustained through imitation (“let’s do a band”). It is sustained through conversation (people tell one another about what they have seen, about what it means to them, about the ways in which they were, or were not moved). It is sustained by expectation. And, even though Butchart feels as if expectation may be a detriment to the
scene, at least the original scene he and his friends shared, that expectation helps sustain
the magic. It helps to fuel outsiders’ imaginations.

Tommy Womack, a musician from Kentucky, felt that there was something
special about the Athens scene:

I was enchanted with it. It was a Utopia, almost. They found a
way to live: the bohemian factor to everybody’s lives, the rule-breaking.
Nobody was going out to get corporate jobs. They were staying close to
Athens and forming bands. Making their own music and their own art
right there. Not really thinking of a big pay day or a house with a two car
garage—just enjoying their artistic quality of life.

It [the scene’s formation] was kind of a coincidental thing. It
became an artist colony like Woodstock, New York or some towns like
that. There was something in the water. The right people moved there
then the right people moved there to be around them. The right elements
going planted together and sprout. (Womack 2004)

As the mystique of Athens grew in the early 1980s, so did its rock scene. The
“secret party” became public. Musicians, like Womack, began to identify the scene-ster
of Athens as rule-breaking bohemians. (Meanwhile, original members of the scene, like
Butchart, just felt as if they were kids looking for a special time—a special place to call
their own.) Little did they know that their actions would transform the identity of the
scene, and the identities of those who would come to become a part of it.

The city still seems to possess that special power. It is still alluring to many
musicians. Patterson Hood of the band the Drive-by Truckers, explains why he was
drawn to Athens and why he believes others are drawn there. For him, it begins with the
reputations built by Athens more popular musical acts:

One thing led to another which led to another which kind of just
kept building and growing on it. You know, the B-52’s might have shown
the guys that became R.E.M. the possibility of doing something like that . .
. [succeeding] without moving to L.A. to try and do it. R.E.M.’s success
might have led to directly or indirectly what Wide Spread Panic [did].
And, of course, Wide Spread Panic attracts a whole different kind of following, and a different crowd. But that all grows on itself. And because of the R.E.M. thing, you know, all these alterna-pop bands started popping up, and that led to something else.

And one thing—who knows? There might be someone down the line who ends up moving here because of something they experience when they come see one of our shows. I don’t know. Or Juicer, who is another band from here who is out on the road all the time. [They work] hard, trying to grow, but there is no denying that they come from here and call this home even though they pretty much live in an RV now . . . So it all kind of feeds on itself.

And it’s a small kind of laid-back town. You can walk to downtown from pretty much anywhere you live around here. There in a five or six block area are five really great rock clubs that are, in the case of three or four of them, as good as, or comparable to, any club in America—or the world. I mean the 40-watt can hang with a 700 seat club anywhere in the world. It is as good as any, and probably run by nicer and better people than most.

Then, people like David Barbie, and Andy Baker, and Angela Master and John Keene opened up studios here that provide, you know, really, really inexpensive, on the national scale, studio time, and will work with bands and all of that. Young bands who couldn’t afford to go to New York and record can record right here at home and end up making a record that’s as good as anything they could have made in New York.

All these different factors all feed on it and all help it.

It’s an oasis [in the South]. People come from places like where I came from, or where you came from. You know, if you are leaving Cumming, Georgia, or Florence, Alabama, and you don’t want to move to the city, and you don’t want to live in Atlanta, what other alternatives are there? Where else are you going to be where you can get this?

I think [the scene’s musicians] are extremely supportive of each other. I mean everyone has their cliques, you know. “I don’t like that band because they play this kind of music.” Or whatever. That’s gonna happen. But in the grand scheme of things, I would like to think that, you know, people are still proud of people from genres that they may not care for—that they can achieve some kind of success just for the home team . . . I would like to think that. I know. I worked sound for years here. I worked sound at the Hi-Hat, and I was the monitor guy at the 40 Watt. And we’d do sound for a lot of bands—sometimes bands I liked, sometimes bands I hated, and all that. But generally it is a pretty friendly time. (Hood 2004)

Hood lists among the alluring qualities of Athens several aspects of a mature scene. He points to the scene’s infrastructure, its nightclubs, and its recording studios, as
one of its alluring qualities. He also addresses matters of community, the supportive and nurturing nature of the city’s musicians, the friendly character of the town. All of these components of the scene, all of these elements that define its character, serve to draw people to it.

David Henry, a musician who now resides in Nashville, has this to say about his experience in Athens in the early 90s:

Athens doesn’t feel like living anywhere else in Georgia . . . it is certainly the most liberal city in Georgia. The college kind of feeds this wonderful, almost reckless kind of energy that you feel buzzing on the sidewalks on a Friday night—even on a Tuesday night. You kind of go down there and get a little charge. It does create—there’s something happening there. And a lot of people come there from these small towns and they bring a lot of that identity with them. (Henry 2004)

The magic of the Athens scene still exists and it continues to affect the individuals who seek it out while those who seek it, in turn, contribute to the magic. The individuals create and feed off the energy. They sustain it.

**Coming Together**

*I met guitarist Sean Kelly in the Belmont cafeteria. He was eating alone and looked rather uncomfortable. But it was not my humanity or a sense of empathy that drew me to him. I was drawn to the R.E.M. shirt he wore. We struck up a conversation and ended up swapping cassettes of our high school bands.*

*Soon we were rehearsing. He brought along a bassist—a guy that he heard rehearsing in the dorm room next to his, Tom Bredesen. I brought the drummer, my roommate and friend of eleven years, Chip Jordan. Things clicked almost immediately. We played as if we’d been doing it for years. It just felt right. We soon began to*
anticipate each other’s moves. Each one of us became accustomed to the other’s rhythms. We were becoming, as musicians like to say, tight.

“Great show last night.” The girl smiled and turned away.

I barely had time to register the compliment. “Oh. Uh, thanks,” I said to the back of her head as she hurried off to class.

I was not too aware of it then, but this would eventually change me. It was an addiction. People were beginning to recognize me as something other than a random lanky guy awkwardly tripping down the halls of the university. They were granting me purpose and identity. After several more compliments and congratulations I began to seek it out—the praise.

I stared expectantly at people as I passed them in the halls or in the quad. “Did they see my performance last night?” I wondered to myself. “Were they impressed?” I interpreted every smile as a knowing confirmation of my talent, of my ability to entertain. More than ever, I was convinced that this was the path I was meant to take. School? It was purely secondary, a diversion meant only to keep my parents satisfied. I was no longer Kevin Murphy, Belmont University Freshman. I was Kevin Murphy, Lead singer for the Lounge Flounders. I was going to make it.

Make it. How often that phrase is repeated amongst musicians. “When we make it, we’ll take you along with us.” Or, “So you think I have what it takes? Do you think I can make it?”

It contains so many possibilities. There are so many ways in which it might be deconstructed. It can be seen as a desperate utterance, something from a melodramatic
film—a death sequence: The hero clings to his last scrap of life. “I’m not sure [He gasps, takes in a great gulp of air] I’m going to make it.”

On the other hand, it can appear to possess significant substance. It is a solid phrase. It is action that implies mass. Something is created when you “make it.” The “something” made becomes dependant upon the maker—the creator. The phrase places your fate solidly in your own hands.

But, being a phrase oft repeated, it is usually said with little thought. It is heard, learned and used. It is code. It is a spoken wish. It is a plea for achievement. It is hope for advancement.

I recall the first time I used it as such. It came in the form of a question. “Do you think I have what it takes to make it?”

Sean and I were walking across campus, returning to our dorms from rehearsal. It was dark, a Nashville winter dusk, a thick, almost palpable, dark accentuated with bursts of bitter chill. We talked quietly, but excitedly, of things to come. As we passed the courtyard outside the student center, someone called our names. I turned to see Charley.

His great basso voice boomed across the courtyard. He motioned to us. “Come over here guys, I’ve got someone you should meet.” He sat, nearly folded in half, all six foot four of him hunched in his chair. He cupped a cigarette in his right hand, squinting as he smiled his toothy smile, between each drag and puff.

“There’s someone I want you to meet.”

We stopped and stared expectantly.
“This is my friend Joseph. He graduated from here with a music business degree. He’s working for a publishing company now.” He turned to his friend, his head bobbed up and down as he chuckled. “The big time, huh, Joseph? These are the guys I was telling you about. The ones in that band—The Lounge Flounders. I think you’d really like their stuff.” He turned back to us. “Why don’t y’all play him something guys?”

Sean and I stared uncomfortably at one another. We politely declined, but Charley insisted. So, we took our guitars from our cases, shyly debated about what we should play. Heads down, turned away from our audience, we mumbled our options. We finally settled on a song we’d recently composed, a slow, contemplative number, perfect for a winter’s evening.

A brief silence followed our performance. Charley was the first to speak, “See, I told you they were good.” Joseph nodded in agreement. There followed more silence, during which a question began to burn the back of my throat. I could not contain it. I could not stop myself. Here, in front of me was a man with experience—a man who knew. He could tell me. I could not stand it. I could not hold it back no longer:

“Do you think I have what it takes to make it?”

I regretted having asked the question as soon as it left my lips and fell frozen in the evening chill. How does one respond to that? The answer is: awkwardly. Joseph politely responded but offered no insight, no future predictions. How could he?

We chatted for a moment more, but I had effectively killed the courtyard meeting. We said our goodbyes. And walked away.

A few minutes later, Charley caught up with us. He seemed unaffected by my question. He just walked along side of me and stared.
“You know,” he said rather contemplatively, “a walk is something we all have to change from time to time. I mean, the way we walk. I had to change mine.”

This comment seems rather random, but at the time I knew exactly what he was getting at. I had always been teased about my walk—a sort of spastic strut, an awkward version of John Travolta’s opening stroll in Saturday Night Fever. Charley was giving me advice. “If you want to make it,” he was saying, “there are some things about yourself you are going to have to change. For starters, rock stars don’t walk like that.”

Of course he did not make it that explicit. He just provided an example of an alternative walk. “Maybe you should walk by placing one foot directly in front of the other—like an Indian.” He demonstrated.

I laughed about it and brushed him off—made the whole episode an inconsequential joke. But when I got back to my room, and realized that Chip had not yet returned from rehearsal, I shut the door and began practicing my new walk—one foot in front of the other, like an Indian.

A Scene in Place: The Nashville Scene

As the Athens scene began to grow in the late 1970s, Nashville, Tennessee was already home to an established country music scene. And, being an established scene, an infrastructure already existed for those wishing to perform and record rock music. Musicians in the area found Nashville to be a convenient, almost obvious, location to ply their trade.
After spending time in Athens and deciding it was not exactly the type of scene he was looking for, that it did not suit his musical identity, David Henry decided to try his luck in Nashville:

That’s ultimately what led us [David and his twin brother Ned] here to Nashville: was the fact that the only thing going on in Athens, of any kind of credibility, was all the jam band stuff like Widespread Panic and Allgood. You know, great bands but for a guy like me who was wanting to do a little more pop stuff, or something, there was not a lot of options . . . I just decided to come to Nashville. You know it was either New York, L.A., London or Nashville. I wasn’t into country music all that much; but I knew there would be a scene here . . . For me . . . the songwriter thread in Nashville is so great. You know, even though I’m not into the country market, that’s not really my scene; but you can’t help but be influenced by it. You know, lyricists here are so clever. Even if it’s just stupid pickup-truck lyrics, the way they put them together is so clever. You just have to admire that. Maybe it’s just their rhyme scheme or something. I think that made us really start focusing on lyrics—not just whatever you came up with after the first five minutes after you got the melody.

People are friendly here in Nashville . . . We are more concentrated here [than New York or L.A.] which is kind of fun. I mean we’re just on top of each other here. There’s as many musicians, certainly in the bigger cities . . . but they are all over the place. It may take you an hour to get to each other. Here, we bump into each other at the coffee shop. I know guys who are writing songs together because they met each other walking the dog. You can go to a restaurant at lunch and every other table seems to be talking: You know, “Producer. Manager. Sound check.” Whatever. And the resource base is just so concentrated. At the drop of a hat, I can call up half a dozen guitarists or drummers and they all live within a five mile radius. We all know each other and it seems like a really exciting place to come and make a record.

It is also an exciting place to come and learn your craft. Most people come here—especially the scene I’m in, the Triple A, Americana, Roots, whatever you know, it’s not country, it’s not the Christian market (which is big here) . . . You come here. You learn your craft from other musicians. You hit the road. (Henry 2004)

There are a great many resources available in Nashville; and, as Henry suggests, they are comparable to those found in New York, Los Angeles, and London. It is a convenient move for a musician already located in the Southern United States. There is a great pool
of talented musicians with which an individual may interact and learn from.

Additionally, the scene is not restricted to one genre of music, as Henry felt Athens was. A musician with open ears and an open mind can find just what he or she is looking for.

In the late 1980s Kentucky musician Mike Grimes moved to Nashville where he found a well-established rock scene. As he reports,

In January of ’89 me and my girlfriend moved to Nashville. And I’ve got to say that that was one of the best things to ever happen to me. I was comfortable in Bowling Green . . . playing in a little band there (Go-Go Surreal). But she [my girlfriend] . . . gave me an ultimatum [“move with me to Nashville, or I’m moving to Atlanta”]. And that was, ultimately, the best thing that ever happened to me—picking up and moving to Nashville . . . She and I broke up six months later. I’m still there [in Nashville]. She’s back in Bowling Green, married.

I looked up to all the bands [in Nashville] who were doing what I wanted to do. And I kind of held those bands in esteem . . . in, you know, pretty high—reverence. Whenever they came to Bowling Green . . . I was totally excited every time Walk The West, or Royal Court of China, or the Boilers, or The Questionnaires, or any number of other bands came I was real excited, you know . . . Naturally, now, a lot of those guys I really looked up to at the time are, I still look up to them, but they’re kind of more like peers now.

The scene in ’89/’90: What I recall, it was still pretty healthy there for about three or four years. Then it seemed around ’94/’95 to stagnate. I thought. I thought it stagnated around ’95. That was also around the time that I left. I got a corporate job working for Sony and moved to Atlanta for about six months. And, uh, after the Bis-quits [a band in which Grimes played with Tommy Womack] broke up . . . About ’98 it started kicking up again. It seemed like [for] about three years things were dead—especially in Nashville.

I think that part of the thing that rekindled peoples’ excitement about going to see live music again was Joe, Mark’s Brother. Some reason. I don’t know . . . Whenever they moved down [from New Jersey] something about their spirit, I think, was one of the pivotal things that helped people get fired up again. There was a whole new community of people who started playing together, and just got re-invigorated about music . . . at least that’s my perspective on it.

A lot of people started getting record deals around ’98. Bobby [Bare Jr] got his deal and the Screamin’ Cheetah Wheelies were kicking around about that time. Yeah, a lot of people just got excited about seeing Joe Mark’s Brother . . . You also look at other bands that continued that whole
time that are established now—like Lambchop. Lambchop started in ’92 and didn’t start getting their just desserts for almost ten years.

I think right now we are where you can look at what has transpired over the last twenty years and it just leads to the whole thing being pretty exciting and invigorating right now.

There was a little event that was going on around ’96 when I returned from Atlanta. Ross Rice, who was in Human Radio (and also did a solo record that was produced by Brad Jones) . . . started this little jam thing on the second floor of the Pub of Love, and he was, he basically just had people come and jam every Tuesday.

That’s where I met Joe [of Joe, Mark’s Brother]. I walked in there . . . I was sitting there and jamming, and this guy Joe sits down next to me and starts just playing this off-the-wall, really unorthodox style of jamming with everybody. And I was like, “Damn. He’s got his own thing going on for sure.” And I remember that kind of being a thing that got me excited about getting back into music for myself for a while there.

It really went from, you could do a gig at 12th and Porter and have one hundred people show up and you were happy. You were like, “Man, a hundred people showed up to see so and so last week.” And that was great. Then it seemed once Joe, Mark’s Brother started firing up, you could get 150, 200 people to show up for a gig and it was a lot more. It just seemed like more people were supporting it . . . I just see a lot more of a sense of community than I saw in that ’93 to ’98 period. (Grimes 2004)

Community. A scene is nothing if not a community; and the Nashville rock community was one that Grimes always wanted to join. He changed his position from an outside admirer, to that of an insider—a peer to all the musicians he once held in high regard. His identity shifted from fan to participant.

Grimes’s narrative also presents another identity shift—he shifts from fan to commentator. His insider’s status allows him to comment on the changes taking place within the scene. This status provides him with an authoritative voice. He uses this voice to proclaim the scene stagnant in 1995, and to point to a single catalyst for the scene’s rebirth—the appearance of the band Joe, Mark’s Brother. Grime’s authority on the Nashville scene, his insider status, is not only derived from his participation in the scene as a musician. Grimes performs other roles within the scene.
Night, Palace

Back stage is a shroud of smoke and shadow. Musicians wander amidst a sea of guitar amplifiers, snare drums and cymbal stands. Some stand in the corner, silently contemplating their cigarettes, mentally preparing themselves for their performances. Others rehearse their parts. A drummer restlessly taps out perididdles on his knee. A singer paces back and forth. Mumbling to himself, he restlessly repeats his onstage banter. Two tall muscular men dressed in black, their heads shaved, guitars in hand, stand face to face. They rehearse a riff over and over. A heavy, harmonized bit of speed metal screams from their guitars. The ascending melody repeats—faster, faster. Their heads nod violently in time with the music.

A gentleman approaches the stage’s side entrance. He is tall. His tight leather pants and long straight, stringy hair accentuate his height and leanness. He bounds up to the stage taking three steps in a single leap. He approaches the microphone with confidence—assurance. The stage is his.

He grabs hold of the mike stand with one hand—pushes it slightly away, does a two-step backward swagger, stands collecting energy as he assesses the audience. They fall silent. He brings the microphone to his lips; and, in a voice roughly similar to those heard in radio spots for tractor pulls and monster truck rallies, he says, “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you all to the Cannery.”

He looks around, accepts the applause. His eyebrows arch. A sly smile spreads across his face as he leans close in to the microphone.
He yells. “I smell metal in the air tonight.” His fist shoots up into the air.

Applause.

“No, I’d like you all to give a big round of applause for . . . The Lounge Flounders!”

The lights come up on four stunned college kids, decidedly un-metal in their t-shirts and loose fitting jeans. They—we—jangle through our first number, but with an extra bit of intensity. There are real metal fans in the audience tonight and they look restless, easily annoyed, and they are rather large. No need to disappoint them if we don’t have to.

Club owners are (please excuse the generalization) an interesting breed. The Cannery possessed a particularly interesting example: Gus Palace. Palace, a former Nashville rocker turned entrepreneur, sported all the aesthetic accoutrements of nineteen eighties rock and roll—the wiry, heroin-thin build, the tight leather pants, the long hair, and the bubbly blonde hanging off his right arm. He was a ghost, a specter, a shadow of a faded scene. As such, he held a transitional role. He promoted new acts. He encouraged and showcased new bands. And he made as much money as he could off of them.

Club Owners, Engineers, and Soundmen: Roles Within A Scene

A scene’s structure is a complicated thing to dissect. The parts comprising in the whole may be named. They may be defined. But the multiple roles and intersecting spheres of influence are more difficult to represent. The scene is divided amongst many different sub-genres of music, all defining themselves in relation to the larger
sound/vision of the region—either in compliance or opposition. It is easy to think of this as a circle—the scene—surrounding a network of smaller, overlapping circles, each containing bands and their networks of contacts—the other elements that make up a scene.

For instance, two bands that play entirely different styles of music might share a common rehearsal space. They might record at the same studio, might count the same local deejay as a band-supporter. The two acts might perform in different venues. They might otherwise travel in completely different musical circles; but their circles overlap at some point and through this contact their identities are somehow changed. “Oh, you know the guys in band X?” A positive response can establish friendships and connections. It can be a ticket to access further realms of identity shaping influence.

In addition, a musician might also perform various roles within a scene. He might work as a producer and studio engineer, as does David Henry. He might run a club, book musical acts, he might operate a record store, as does Mike Grimes. He might work as a club’s house sound man. All of these roles serve to shape an individual’s identity and help provide him with multiple perspectives of a scene. As Henry puts it,

After hearing so many great artists come through—getting to record them and produce. It’s like okay, now I feel like I know what a song should sound like, and how it should be structured, arranged and produced so that, hopefully, it will connect with an audience. (Henry 2004)

As a producer/engineer, Henry is privy to the inner-workings of the recording process. He is present when bands and solo artists rehearse, re-vamp, and record their songs. This is a view not afforded the average working musician. Henry is able to incorporate this
information into his own artistic identity. This “insider’s view” affects the way in which he functions as a songwriter, as a musician, and as a recording artist.

Grimes is also a former club owner, and currently owns and operates a record store. His multiple roles provide him with a broad perspective of the scene. He looks at it this way,

I think the truly exciting times, for me, were in the last year and a half or so, because there was just so much amazing stuff happening all the time. Maybe it’s because I was so inside of it, and I was booking live music, you know, constantly at Slow Bar and doing everything I could to bring in acts from out of town who hadn’t toured through Nashville before . . .

My primary effort, my primary motivation is: well, I had two motivations at Slow Bar—I had to pay my bills, which were really high. So I had to find a way to get tons of people to come to the Slow Bar all the time. I was glad that part of the way, part of the excitement that was generated through the Slow Bar was that we brought a lot of bands through the town that had not been through the town before—and come back. I feel bad now, there’s a lot of bands that have come through again since we closed and not had great care. And they say, “Man. I wish you guys would re-open.”

There should be a broader base of just music fans. We are doing the best job we can at Grimey’s [Grimes’s record store] and at the, well, future Slow Bar² to let people know what is out there—that there is more than what most people are spoon fed. (Grimes 2004)

Grimes, as he clearly states above, has multiple motivations. He is interested in making money from his efforts. But, he is also interested in shaping the tastes of the Nashville scene. He hopes that his influence will change the face of the current scene by broadening its boundaries, increasing musicians’, as well as the publics’ awareness of what is available, letting them know that there are many great bands available in the Nashville area. By doing this, Grimes hopes to increase the number of music fans in Music City.
My relationship with Frank, the soundman at the Exit/In, was, at times, somewhat tumultuous. We did not get along when we first met. He can seem somewhat abusive to the uninitiated. The Exit’s stage belongs to him. Sound check follows his rules. You do not speak unless spoken to. You do not make a sound unless it is requested. You are expected to provide succinct answers to direct questions. And you must never complain. Follow these rules and all will proceed smoothly. Demur, and suffer the wrath of Frank.

I made two mistakes during our first meeting. I abused his equipment, completely manhandled a mike stand. I leaned on it, twisted myself around it bent it backwards and forwards—put way too much stress on its joints. For this, Frank gave me a heated lecture about the cost of microphone stands and the penalties I would pay if I ever treated his equipment in this way again.

After things cooled off a bit, Frank extended the following compliment:

“You put on one hell of a show tonight. You’re a really great performer. Your songs suck. But you do know how to put on a show.”

“My what, what?”

This was astounding to me. Did the sound guy just tell me my songs sucked? I was beyond offended. I mean, maybe they did, but too be told that they did . . . he really should just have kept it to himself.

That was my second mistake—taking it too seriously. Later I would come to shrug such comments off. After all, it was “just Frank.” His lack of tact was what made him loveable.
The men and women who operate a club’s sound system hold an interesting position in a local music scene. Night after night they are treated (or subjected) to a scene’s music. If they work at a popular club—a club frequented by scene-sters—they are known to many. This familiarity leads to a popular topic of conversation among bands in a scene—soundman stories. It seems that many cities have their own eccentric soundmen; and bands love to share tales that relate to their quirks.

I asked Patterson Hood to tell me a little bit about his experience working as a soundman in Athens, Georgia. Hood was a working musician before he took on the role of soundman, and I wondered if that role affected his identity as a soundman. If being a musician who was familiar with soundmen, particularly the eccentric lot, would make him more self-conscious about how he acted when he took on that role. Hood told me that he knew the type that I referred to; but he made sure to let me know that my assessment was somewhat unjust, that being a soundman is a difficult job. He said,

[Being a soundman] made me real grumpy. Particularly around year four or year five of it? I’m like, if I hear one more god damned band that do a certain list of things that way too many bands that I just didn’t like did—you know: “I’m gonna kill somebody.”

But getting past the grumpiness of it, I got to see what a diverse array of talent there is here. I mean, there truly is—and in all genres of music. Because in some of the bands, that I personally may not of liked, once I could remove myself from having to deal with them once a month at a club, there’s no denying a certain amount of talent that one of the guys in some of these bands might have. And I’m going to respect that whether I’m into that or not.

When I first started doing it, I had this list in my head of things I would never do as a sound guy—that I would never be “that guy,” and a certain list of ways. Around year four/year five, you know, I was becoming that guy. It was time for me to find a way to get out of that business.

When you are a house guy in a club, you tend to see certain things done over and over—almost to the point of them becoming clichés. And
you get really grumpy about the clichés. Whether it is just the band that comes in terminally unprepared—or late, or rude, or the band that pulls eight people on a Tuesday night: You know, they come in and they act like they’re the fucking Rolling Stones. You get all the clichés, you know. The sound guy ends up becoming one of the clichés himself. (Hood 2004)

Hood’s prior knowledge and experience with soundmen did, in fact, influence his approach to the job. As he states, he did not want to become “that guy,” the typical, grumpy soundman. But the situation also worked in reverse. He saw how bands, and musicians could wear on a soundman, how hearing music night after night could become a burden, and could affect a person’s attitude. Hood, like David Henry and Mike Grimes, was able to view the scene from a different perspective. Because of this, he was able to gain a more detailed view of his relation to it.

We have seen how local music scenes develop, how they expand and grow from the artist audience relationship, to include specialized roles such as soundmen, club owners, and studio engineers. We have seen how musicians evaluate the character of a scene, and discussed why that scene’s character might prove alluring. We have investigated the ways in which musicians take on multiple roles within a scene and how those multiple roles, often times, result in a changed perspective results in an identity. In the next chapter we will take a look at matters of place and see how landscape affects local music scenes.
Again, it must be pointed out that this is from my perspective. I felt used by him. At the same time, he provided my band and me with valuable lessons in club etiquette.

In a related sidebar—and as an illustration of multiple perspectives—I happened to meet a former Nashville resident in London. He was the lone patron in a pub called Oz. I was traveling solo, killing time before meeting my cousin, who was attending a London branch of an American university, for dinner. I struck up a conversation with this gentleman only to find that, not only had he lived in Nashville, but that he was a close friend of Gus Palace. Together they created The Metro, a Nashville entertainment magazine. I began with my, by then well rehearsed, rant about the money-grubbing ways of Mr. Palace, only to be cut short by my very annoyed new acquaintance.

“Gus Palace put up all he had to help bands like yours succeed—to help them get a foot in the door. I would rather you not say anything else derogatory about him.”

I was silenced. Ashamed. I never thought of it in that way. I never encountered that perspective.

Grime’s bar/nightclub, The Slo-Bar was forced to close in 2004 due to a steadily increasing rent. He hopes to soon re-open in a new location.
Chapter 2

The Landscape

A Nashville Dream

I float above the Nashville streets. Staring down, I see it all—every place I knew, every place I know. I see the past superimposed upon the present—everything as it is and as it was at the same time. Through the Papa John’s Pizza on Broadway I can see the old Taj Mahal. I stand on a stage at the back of the room. I smile at the gathered crowd. I stand behind the deli counter at the Corner Market. I am pacing the sidewalk in front of Cummings Station, my feet pounding desperate dreams into the concrete.

Floating above 3rd avenue I see the old church where we recorded our first record. Then, drifting over 12th I see meetings with record executives, conversations with soundmen, backstage-pre-show-jitters.

It’s on to Hillsboro Village where I sit sipping beer at the Iguana. I glance at the table to my right and see friends, local musicians Matt Ryan and Josh Rouse, staring across the table at one another. They look as if they are planning a revolution. They speak in hushed tones. “Smudge,” says Ryan. Rouse smiles in agreement. They have it: their new genre, their new term, a genre for genre bending, for genre blending. There are no clean lines of demarcation—only a smudge.

Drifting up, I lose sight of the Village. I become confused. Where am I now? I see homes and half-familiar streets but nothing is quite clear. Then I hear the beginnings of a familiar melody.
But why is that song so familiar? I cannot quite grasp it. Finally, I recognize the singer’s voice. They lyrics become clear: “There’s a black chick on my block with blond hair/swears that she’s the sister of Marilyn Monroe.” It’s Paul Tyson, an old friend, an old neighbor. The song is simply entitled “Neighborhood,” it is Paul’s homage to the neighborhood we once shared—the Belmont area of Nashville. The woman he mentions in the first line of this song was one of Belmont Boulevard’s characters. She used to pace up and down the street mumbling to herself about being related to the famous actress.

The song continues: “There’s a shitty band paying upstairs/above the International Market, and on the coffeehouse stairs./It’s my neighborhood.” Indeed it is. The confusion subsides and I see the old Ashwood avenue apartment building that the Flounders used to share with the members of Love Circle Logic, Paul’s band.

Paul chronicled a summer of band debauchery in “Neighborhood.” The old street, the old buildings, and the song combine and intertwine. They help me to recall the whole picture. I drift down, touch ground and lose myself inside the memory.

Apartments, front porches, warehouse rehearsal rooms, coffee shops, and bars. Music stores, night clubs, neighborhoods and streets. The scene spreads throughout a city. Its members meet in bars. They discuss past and future performances. They plan. They scheme. They share their dreams and fears. They rehearse. They perform. They live.

Landscape plays an important role in the shaping of a scene. It provides a location—a place on which the scene is situated. Its features, both man-made and
natural, are capable of exerting quite a bit of influence. These features provide inspiration for art, and at the same time, they serve as place markers for memories.

Kent Ryden, in his book *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, states that,

since places are fusions of experience, landscape, and location, they are necessarily bound up with time and memory as well. The experiences which create and establish places recede inevitably into the past, so that one important quality of places is that they are ‘the present expressions of past experiences and events’—contemplation of place quickly rings to mind earlier stages in one’s life, episodes in the history of a community, formative and notable events and experiences. The landscape of a place is an objectification of the past, a catalyst for memory. (1993:39)

These memories provide strong connections to place. So much so that these places, these topographical features, and buildings find their way into the songs and stories that are sung and told by members of the scene. This enshrinement of place in song and tale adds an extra layer of meaning to the landscape. They enhance what Ryden refers to as the “invisible landscape . . . the unseen layer of usage memory, and significance . . . superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map” (1993:40).

The landscape, already a concept that exists as the result of cultural imagination (space is place imagined), is further altered by superimposing this extra layer of meaning. Its meaning, as it pertains to members of the scene, is changed. It changes the perception of place. The place becomes a storehouse for memory, a place marker for an event, an enclave\(^1\). The place becomes special.

Take, for instance, Tommy Womack’s statement pertaining to the relationship his band, Government Cheese, had with their hometown/base, Bowling Green, Kentucky:

[Government Cheese] had a kinship with Bowling Green. There was a certain—everybody who lived in Bowling Green loved it and hated it. There was camaraderie and a sense of humor to living in Bowling Green
that we all felt common to ourselves. While it wasn’t the most exciting place to live, there was a kinship—a certain magic to Bowling Green. Once you were there for a long while you were able to smell it and pick up on it. There were special people there. And special times to be had. (Womack 2004)

A common place, a common landscape can help provide solidarity within a scene. A community develops that shares the experience of place. Common stories develop and attach themselves to certain landmarks (see Womack’s mention of the water tower below). Groups of people re-live their experiences with place through memory, through storytelling, and in works of art. This collective re-imagining, re-presenting, of space, creates the idea of place. “The camaraderie and sense of humor,” the “kinship” mentioned by Womack all seem to be a direct result of landscape, of that re-presenting of a communities interaction with space, of place, of living in Bowling Green.

Landscape in Song

The kinship that comes from the sense of sharing a common landscape can often result in that landscape being enshrined in works of art. As Womack says,

[The town] found its way into song [in “C’mon Back to Bowling Green and Marry Me”]. There were so many songs that we did that mentioned specific places in Bowling Green, or specific ways of having fun. “Underneath the Water Tower,” was one. (Womack 2004).

Several members of the Athens scene report that this extra layer of meaning is one of the primary reasons or their move to the city. The whole community seems to be documented in song (Ballard, Sleppy 2004). Athens bands such as R.E.M. add to Athens’s mystique by writing songs that mention and describing the local landscape. As Athens musician Bob Sleppy says, “Almost every corner you turn, you see a song, or a
piece of Athens’s musical history. You can point to a building and say, ‘Oh, that’s the Fire House liquor store from [R.E.M.’s song] ‘Oddfellows Local 151,’ or there’s Wendel’s [a local Barbecue restaurant sung about on the album Dead Letter Office]” (Sleppy 2004).

This singing of place adds extra significance to the landscape while, at the same time, drawing inspiration from it. The places documented in song are chosen because they pique the imagination, because of the cultural activity they represent. Favorite neighborhoods, local hangouts, restaurants, bars, and historical landmarks all may become the subject of songs because someone sensed something special about them or felt a certain connection to them—because they experience with them. By recognizing, or imagining, these elements, by enshrining them in song, the authors heap greater significance upon the places they describe, increasing their worth within the greater cultural imagination of the scene.

**History Inscribed on Landscape**

A place may be considered significant, or influential, because of its history, and because that history directly communicates, has direct relevance, to members of the scene. A casual stroll through downtown Athens reveals even more of the city’s musical heritage. There are buildings that once served as make-shift clubs for the original scene-sters in the 70s. Although some are now retail outlets or office space, they still possess special significance to members of the local music scene. They are still proudly pointed out to visitors and tourists seeking information about the scene’s history (Sleppy, Butchart 2004).
As with Athens, Nashville’s landscape is enhanced by its music history. Its history, however, might be argued to have a greater time depth, at least where public/popular consciousness is concerned. Even if the “Country” aspect of Nashville’s music scene is discounted (which is a near impossibility) a musician is left staring at the ghosts and shadows of Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan. When you add in the country scene, factoring in the influence of Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Loretta Lynn (to name but a few) on the modern rock scene, you have a, a significant depth of time, great sense of history on your hands, and quite an affected landscape.

That landscape, a landscape that includes monuments, historic buildings/recording studios, museums, as well as the buildings housing the music industry that supports Nashville’s Country scene, known affectionately as “Music Row,” provides a great challenge for the modern musician in Nashville. Some, like musician/studio engineer, David Henry, find that it is a unifying force.

It seems like because of that, [because] we are all under the shadow of this big cowboy hat. Maybe that it does help push the musicians together. It helps people focus and you go out and hear another great band, or a great singer, or a great writer. Really, it is inspiring to help get your own thing going that much better. [It makes you think,] what can I do to achieve that? (Henry 2004)

Others, however, do not share Henry’s optimistic outlook. For them Nashville’s great musical legacy, and the machinery that surrounds it, makes them feel rather small and frustrated.

The Confrontation
“You are a sell out.”

He stared straight at me. I started to smile, but the kid was not joking.

“A what?” I asked.

“You are a sell out. I used to really respect your band. I looked up to y’all, but that last show . . . you guys really think you’re something now don’t you?”

“No. Not really. We were just playing a show, man. What did—how did we sell out?”

“Dude. You added the keyboard player. And you were all dressed up, dancing around, acting all cocky. It made me sick.”

“It made you sick? What the? First of all, there are keys all over our album. We wanted to incorporate them into our live show.”

“Yeah but . . .” He nodded his head and rolled his eyes as if his original statement held all the proof he needed. He did not continue. He did not need to speak. His expression repeated it for him, “Sell-out.”

“Secondly, I’m not making sell-out money. Don’t you have to get paid to sell out?”

His face was blank. He would not be budged. He continued on his rant with the dogmatic conviction that I had sold out—that The Lounge Flounders let him and the Nashville rock community down.

I grew furious. But what could I say? I was backstage at the Exit/In talking with some friends from out of town, a band we recently toured with. I did nothing to provoke the attack. Hell, the kid really wasn’t even supposed to be there. Bruce, the club manager, hired him to help with the band’s load-in. He often hired local musicians to
help fulfill contract rider obligations of this sort. It helped him, and it put a little money in the pockets of needy musicians. I’d done the job before myself. But I certainly never had the audacity to sit back stage and harass innocent bystanders. I did the work I was hired to do.

I just stared at him sitting there on his stool in the corner his face red from his diatribe, his eyes puffy from too many beers. It was embarrassing. All I wanted to do was catch up with my friends. Find out how their life on the road had been; see how they liked their new tour bus. And here is this kid just letting me have it.

The Flounders did not have a tour bus. We did not have a road manager or a contract stipulating that any club in which we performed must provide assistance during load-in. We drove our own van. We did our own work. We were struggling, just really starting out. Granted, for one single home show we hired an extra musician. I tried a new look. I dressed up a little. But I certainly did not alter my performance, nor did anyone else in the band. This attack was, in my opinion, completely undeserved. And it went on far too long.

I said my goodbyes to my friends, shrugged my shoulders and shot a quick glance—half pleading, half apologetic—at the kid in the corner, and headed out the door. The house lights were up in the Exit. It always feels so strange when they come up after a show. So sudden. So severe. All the magic disappears. You see how dirty the floors are, see the broken glass and layers of cigarette ash, smell the stale beer.

I walked over to Frank, the club’s soundman. He was breaking down the sound system, coiling up speaker cable and placing it neatly in a pile on the edge of the stage.

“Great work tonight,” I said.
“Yeah, I really got this baby tweaked just right,” he said, referring to the sound system. “Did you notice that effect I threw on dude’s vocals in that last song?”

I had.

“Listen, Frank, do you think The Flounders sold out?”

“For what?”

“Exactly my point.” I went on to explain the confrontation I had just experienced. Frank, mustering the tact he was famous for, responded: “Fuck ‘im.”

**Adverse Reactions to Landscape: The Nashville Curse**

Musicians in the Nashville rock community have different views regarding country music’s presence on the landscape. Some, as mentioned above, are inspired by the fact that so many influential musicians called, and call, Nashville home. Some, however, find that presence of the country music scene, and the industry that supports it distracting. Indeed, they believe that its very presence on the landscape (the buildings that house the record labels, and the country music themed attractions and shops aimed at the tourist market), distracts and draws attention away from talented artists in Nashville’s rock scene.

“No modern rock band from Nashville will achieve commercial success.” So goes the popular sentiment that’s come to be known as the Nashville Curse. The curse is one by-product of, one reaction to, the country music monolith that exists within the Nashville landscape. The curse’s existence can be pointed to as the cause for all types of tension experienced either between rock and non-rock musicians. It even makes for strained relationships between members of the rock scene (see above). Your actions are
closely monitored by other members of the scene. If you achieve even a modest level of success someone is there to scrutinize your every action. Are you staying true to your roots? Are you being honest? Or, are you selling out—giving yourself over to the music business machine?

Reactions to the mention of the curse vary amongst Nashville musicians. Some react bitterly, some pragmatically, but nearly all the musicians I spoke with point to the presence of the country music industry as a major cause of the problem.

When asked for his opinion on the Nashville Curse, Tommy Womack had this to say:

There was a prejudice against any band that came out of Nashville in the eighties and nineties. New York or L.A. wouldn’t touch them. It was not taken seriously as a rock record if it was made in Nashville. That was an unfair prejudice that damned a lot of bands to hell. And nobody really ever surmounted that. Nobody ever really got past that from Nashville.

So far as the rock scene goes, the rock scene [today] is deader than dog poop. It’s just over. There is still this country monolith. But it’s destroyed itself. It’s eating itself from the inside out and it’s loosing money. And it’s eventually gotta crumble like the Soviet Union. I don’t know when. But, you know, based on the quality of music it’s putting out I can’t imagine it [sustaining] itself that much longer.

Rock is not around anymore that I see. I mean, kids today, what they call rock I don’t call rock. What they listen to, I don’t listen to. I don’t feel a connection to it. I’m [just] a forty-one-year-old old guy when it comes to this new stuff they call rock. (Womack 2004)

Womack’s indictment is rather pointed. Rock in Nashville was unfairly ignored. One can only assume from the attack on Nashville’s country industry that follows this initial statement, that he somehow connects the two. That he believes rock bands from Nashville were ignored because of the overwhelming presence of the country music industry.
Like Womack, Athens musician Patterson Hood feels that Music Row is detrimental to Nashville’s rock scene.

[Nashville’s rock scene has] gotten a lot better lately. You know, I think if you dropped—oh, you can’t even say this anymore, things have gotten so crazy out there I can’t even say it—but, uh, if somehow you were to remove Music Row from the equation, you know, Nashville probably wouldn’t be that bad if the music industry was to leave. And I’m really grateful that to some extent, even though it might be a hardship on the bands on the short term here in Athens, I’m kind of glad that there aren’t a lot of labels here, and that none of the major labels have offices here, and that we are kind of off the radar. And I think it helped my band. I think it was good that we didn’t get discovered by Nashville until a time that we could go in and sell out a club. I think it is good that we didn’t have some guy who does that for a living giving us advice early on. I wouldn’t have taken it if they had’ve. Because this was my second go round. (Hood 2004).

Like Hood, Mike Grimes, a former band mate of Tommy Womack, does not believe that Nashville’s rock scene is dead. He does agree that “Music City” carries a certain stigma.

The Nashville Curse? I think we’ve yet to see a rock band sell millions of records. But there are some success stories. I mean, Venus Hum has sold a lot of records. Josh [Rouse] has sold a lot of records. Bobby [Bare Jr.] has done real well. The Kings of Leon have done really, really well . . .

We are wanting to do anything we can to erase the stigma of Nashville being nothing but Music City and a city that a lot of great indie-rock bands should by-pass. We are trying to make sure that the . . . If we can do anything to put Nashville on the map as anything besides, you know, the Music Row, you know what people generally think of Nashville as ideally being, you know, country music.

And I mean country music in the Music Row . . . Toby Keith and the Martina McBride’s . . . that’s all fine and good. But you know, we’ve got to be known for more than that. It is Music City and not Country Music City. Of course it is going to be—we just win small little battles all the time. We are never gonna win the war . . .

I think that in a lot of bigger metropolitan cities that you are drawing from a bigger population of three or four million, rather than Nashville where you’ve got a million and a half or something like that . . . Bobby says it is the same size as Austin [Texas] and Austin doesn’t have that. It is hard to get a lot of people out to shows in Nashville. And I
think that is largely because Nashville is a music industry town and they [the potential audience] are trying to make it in music. So they don’t go out and see every single thing that comes through town. You do have the die hard music fans. But you do have a lot of people who are songwriters and musicians themselves and they just can’t support every single thing that comes through town . . .

A lot of local bands do much better outside their home town than in Nashville. Hell, Bobby is a prime example of that, Bobby and Josh Rouse and the Shack Shakers. Lambchop does better out of the country than in their own home town. Lambchop sold out Royal Albert Hall last year, 4,200 seats. There’s not enough support but I still consider it to be very vibrant. (Grimes 2004)

Grimes’s opinion of the Nashville curse is tempered with the successes he feels other Nashville acts have achieved. He does not believe that the rock scene is dead. Perhaps his position as an independent record store owner and concert promoter, as well as a musician, informs his opinion. In his business he sees the small successes. He is well aware of acts that are doing well. It is his business to focus on the entire scene and not a just a small portion of it.

An even more positive assessment of the Nashville curse comes from Bobby Bare Jr., a singer-songwriter with whom Grimes often performs. When I asked Bare about the curse he responded as if he did not even know that it existed.

What’s the Nashville curse? I’ve never heard of it I’m sorry. Well, I don’t know. The first thing when people go see a band they ask, “Where are they from?” Because they want to know: Do I buy this? Do I know that these people mean it? And most the people who haven’t been successful out of Nashville are people who don’t sound like they are from Nashville. Most the bands that I think have done pretty well outside of Nashville, you can pretty much tell that they’re going to have something that sounds Nashville-ish. So, I don’t know.

I have no real idea on that. I think everybody is really great. My problem is that Nashville bands do much better out of Nashville than they do in their own hometown. And that just blows my mind. If you can get 100 or 200 people to show up at your Nashville show and you are able to do touring outside of Nashville almost always you end up with bigger crowds in other cities than you do in your own hometown. What is
exciting is the level of talent of people we have here I think is better than any other city per-capita. I think it blows away most any city—especially New York. In New York it is almost un-cool to be really good at what you do.

I never really thought of it as a curse because I have embraced a lot of things that are very Nashville. I open up my mouth and I talk real Southern. And I sing that way. But mostly just to make fun of them—kind of embrace them with one hand and molest them with the other is a fun thing to do. And I think that there are a lot of bands that kind of have fun with that—take it outside of Nashville and are able to tour and do real well. (Bare 2004)

Bare does not directly mention the country music industry, although the “them” he refers to in the statement, “embrace them with one hand and molest them with the other,” is, I believe, a reference aimed at that industry. His point, however, is be who you are. As a musician in Nashville you have to deal with Nashville and all the baggage it entails. He believes musicians are better off being who they are and admitting where they are from rather than attempting to disguise their origins.

Grimes further echo’s Bare’s sentiments:

I think the bands that try to purposefully distance themselves from being from Nashville, if they are from Nashville, those are really the ones that come off as the most insincere, really. People who on their bios don’t say they are from Nashville—and they are. (Grimes 2004)

Again, the sentiment is: Be honest. Be authentic. Do not try to fool the audience; they can spot a phony.

We will speak more of this type of authentic presentation/self representation in the next chapter. For now, however, I would like to reiterate the theme of this chapter: Landscape is indeed an important factor in a scene. Musicians, audiences, and industry alike, react to a scene’s landscape. Both its physical and invisible aspects inspire and motivate, frustrate and anger participants in a scene. In turn, the scene has an effect on the landscape. It alters and enhances the meaning of place. It places layer upon layer of
information upon city streets. It stashes stories underneath the tables of cafes. It encases buildings in meaning and memory.
See the introduction of this paper for a description and definition of enclave.

Located on 16th and 17th avenue in Nashville, Tennessee, Music Row includes major and minor record and publishing companies, management offices and performance rights allocations companies such as BMI and ASCAP.

And that is just the type of thing that happens in Nashville. Everywhere. There is always someone ready, aching to give you advice. You can not escape the industry. Even if your band has nothing to do with country music, there is someone at the coffee shop, or at the record store, in the checkout line at the grocery or in the bathroom in the bar who is prepared to share their valuable industry experience and advice with you.

I interviewed Grimes by phone. He was traveling with Bobby Bare Jr. All references to Bobby are made in Bobby’s presence.

It should be noted, however, that Bare Jr. is the son of noted country artist Bobby Bare and may feel some loyalty to the industry that provided a living for his father. Of course that is only a speculation on my part.
Chapter 3:

A Visual Interlude

Jay Joyce, the man who produced the Lounge Flounders’ record, *Imaginary Saints*, gave this advice regarding the artwork that would accompany our first (and only) major label release. “Make it a record of *this* time. Make the package about the recording of the album. Don’t let them take you down to the railroad tracks *where you always hang out* [stated facetiously] and take your pictures. You guys are not rebel rock and rollers. You are you. Let the album art reflect that. *That* is the interesting story here. A fabricated image provides the wrong impression. It tells the wrong story.”

We took Jay’s advice. I’m glad that we did. Looking back on those photos now, I see that they do represent who we were at the time. They do a good job of reflecting our identities as individuals, as well as our identity as a band. In fact, all of the art work surrounding the Lounge Flounders, and later Canebrake Quartet, reflects either who we were—or who we were trying to be.

Bands present, or represent, themselves graphically in various ways. Images appear on album covers, on promotional press photos, and on fliers and posters advertising upcoming shows. The images range from rustic (black ink hand scrawled on white paper), to professional (glossy, color photographs, perfectly composed). They
appear across a scene in Newspapers, on the racks in record stores, and, in the case of posters and fliers, anyplace it is possible to staple, stick or shove a piece of paper.

A hand drawn flier, hastily composed, might suggest to a potential audience that the band, or solo artist, they will see is a firm believer in the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) aesthetic usually associated with punk rock. They might expect a loose or informal show. Or, they might find a young band struggling to find their sound and identity. On the other hand, a more professional flier such as those printed by Nashville’s hatch show print (see example below) might suggest something a little more formal. Of course there are no hard and fast rules. And there are posters and fliers that fall somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. Regardless of where they fall along this spectrum, the images contribute to the over-all look of a scene.

What follows is a sampling of those images from my personal collection. These are the images that were displayed throughout Nashville on telephone poles, on the walls of night clubs, and on record store shelves. They are assertions of personal/band identity. But they are also part of the visual image of a scene. By posting our flyers in public, by making stickers and posters, and by incorporating Nashville into our album art, we, to a small extent, helped to shape the visual image of the Nashville scene.

Because it is comprised solely of Flounders and Canebrake material, it should not be taken to represent the whole of Nashville. In that way the collection is limited. The collection, however, is complete in the sense that it maps the visual trajectory of a band, in fact, of two bands, from their conceptions to their ultimate demise.
Below: This poster is from the Lounge Flounder’s very first show. It is the first time our name appeared in print. We did not, however, have any control over the image.
Rock Showcase

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29
7:30pm
WHITE DINING ROOM

FEATURED ACTS

ROCK COMBO
FROM THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC

RUMOUR HAZIT

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

THE LOUNGE
FLOUNDERS
These fliers for the early Lounge Flounders’ shows exhibit a loose exuberance. I was eager—eager to incorporate everything I knew, and everything I could do into the band. The cartoon characters that inhabit the fliers are a good
indicator of my mental state at the time—untamed, unrestrained, childlike, and awkward.
THE LOUNGE

FLOUNDERS

A+ EXIT/IN

Mon. March 18 10:00
FREE
21+ only

THE LOUNGE

FLOUNDERS

April FRI. 9:30 at 527 Mainstreet in Murfreesboro
April SAT. 9:00 at the Cannery

only $5.00

HIGH ADVENTURE WITH

THE LOUNGE

FLOUNDERS

FEATURED:
Justin Curtis and Two Fast

$1 at Country Corner Tavern

TUESDAY FEB. 19 9:30
The Lounge Flounders perform for The Days of 103 at the Cannery in 1990. Clockwise from the left: Kevin Murphy, Sean Kelly, Chip Jordan, and Tom Bredesen.

**The Days of 103**

The Lounge Flounders’ first real show (by real I mean a non-campus sponsored event) was sponsored by a Nashville radio station: 103 KDF. The Days of 103: One hundred and three bands performing over a weekend at the three-stage circus that was the Cannery.
All the bands I admired or envied from campus were playing the show: the rock and rollers who casually sprawled in the courtyard outside the student center, the guys with their tangles of long hair framing their practiced smug expressions—the ones who stamped out smoking cigarette butts under their paisley deck shoes, careful to keep the ashes off of their crushed velvet pants. Their bands, Apache Underground, China Black, and Rockfish, dominated my corner of Nashville’s rock scene. They were everything I thought I was supposed to be. They were elegant, possessing a kind of cool that revealed just a hint of crafted-ness, just enough to let you know that if you wanted it you had to work for it; but, if you worked too hard, if your trying seemed too evident, it would all implode. It was a performance—their very being. They were walking advertisements for their upcoming shows. I thought it was glorious. I desperately wanted to be able to pull that off.

I wanted to be them. Now, I was getting a chance to perform under the same roof as them. The first thing I had to do was to come up with an outfit. I needed to fit in. But at the same time, I needed everyone to know that I had my own sense of style—my own sense personality. The result—my father’s old National Guard dress uniform, the pants rolled up to the tops of my combat boots, with a rather loud print shirt (my nod to the rockers’ paisley shoes)—was decidedly goofy. But I was proud. I was also excited and the actual event, the Days, did not disappoint.

I remember it now as an endless mass of milling fans and bands moving back and forth across the Cannery’s old plank floors. Their conversations swirling, rising up and soaking in to the old grain mill’s ceilings—commingling with sounds of the past: the hum of machines, the calls of workers. They lined up at the bar. They pooled in the lobby
to discuss, gossip, and to evaluate their own performances. They stood with arms
crossed by the soundboard, coolly appraising the talent of rival bands. They danced,
drank, and laughed. There was an overwhelming feeling of good will.

Our own set is now something of a blur. I remember the intense rush of energy.
I remember my sweat-drenched uniform—the pride I felt from working up such a sweat. I
put everything into that performance.

I remember the smiles of friends in the audience. I remember them dancing,
acting silly, having fun. But mostly, I recall the post-show compliments of two
individuals—two Nashville musicians who, by my reckoning, had achieved a substantial
level of success. Both performed with musicians of immense talent. Both were known.
They were recognized, had identities, as musicians. They were not the rockers from
Belmont’s courtyard. They were bigger than that. Their bands belonged to the City.
They reached much farther than the acts in my little corner of the scene. And they
complimented me. They liked my performance. They recognized me. At that moment I
felt that I could be a someone here. To hell with Belmont. To hell with the cool kids. I
did not need them. I was on my way.

The Days of 103 did not, as I’d naively hoped, propel me to national stardom. It
simply led to more gigs at the Cannery. Over the next several months The Lounge
Flounders would become experts at the twenty-five minute set—the Cannery’s staple
format: pack as many bands in as you can to broaden audience appeal and bring in
more customers.
Below: The Lounge Flounders’ newsletter. The image of the Lounge Flounders became more focused as the years went on (as did our personal identities). By the time we were ready to release our album, Imaginary Saints, we had decided on a more focused visual identity. Gone were the random images. The album art, newsletters and promotional pictures all focused around the Church on 3rd avenue in Nashville, where we recorded the record.
Upcoming Shows

Your times of sorrow are over! We're coming to town.

MARCH
16 - Clarksville, TN
   - The Warehouse
18 - Birmingham, AL
   - The Nick
19 - Atlanta, GA
   - The Point
20 - Carboro, NC
   - Cat's Cradle
21 - Virginia Beach, VA
   - Nocturnal Cafe
22 - Richmond, VA
23 - Charlotte, NC
   - Fat Tuesday's
25 - Charleston, SC
   - The Music Farm
26 - Wilmington, NC
   - Mad Monk
27 - Columbia, SC
   - Elbo Room
28 - TBA
29 - TBA
30 - TBA

APRIL
2 - Atlanta, GA
   - The Point
3 - Birmingham, AL
   - The Nick
4 - New Orleans, LA
   - Howlin' Wolf
5 - TBA
6 - St. Petersburg, FL
   - The State Theater
9 - Atlanta, GA
   - The Point
10 - Oxford, MS
    - Lafayette's
11 - Jackson, MS
    - Hal & Mal's
12 - Little Rock, AR
    - Juanita's
13 - TBA (probably Memphis)
16 - Atlanta, GA
    - The Point

(CALL CLUBS FOR TIMES.)

The Lounge Flounders

Imaginary Saints

And it came to pass in a city that was then called Nashville—land of milk and over-priced guitars—four young men set out to make their fortunes. Being slow of wit and oblivious to an obviously glutted market, they decided that they would sing for their supper—and an occasional free beer (not that The Lounge Flounders endorse the consumption of alcoholic beverage. - mgmt.) The lads worked diligently, honed their craft, and one day Fate smiled upon them, or maybe smirked. "I tire of your whining," boomed the voice of our man Fate. "Make an album and...we'll see what happens." With this Fate let loose a belly laugh and faded into the horizon. (Note: the part of Fate is played by Mercury Records.) So here it is. (Not in this letter, stupid—you have to go to the store.) This is our chance to change the face of music for eternity, to take the world by the ears and shake it 'til it can't see straight...It's Our Record! You can help. For only $11.98 CD or $7.98 cassette, you can take this record home with you, give it love, nurture it, and let it grow. Come to our show and give us an update on the progress your copy is making. Maybe give us a picture or a note from it so we know it's ok. Call your radio stations and encourage them to take part in this crusade to save our album (and pay our rent). Thanks for your compassion. You are all beautiful people.
Out-takes from the Imaginary Saint’s photo session. Clay Steakley, pictured in the red shirt, replaced bassist Tom Bredesen.
Print sheets for Imaginary Saints’ album art.
On stage at Nashville’s Riverfront Park.

Below: A promotional photo for Canebrake Quartet. Here, our image became more focused as we attempted to play up, enhance our Southern heritage.

Left to Right: Chip Jordan, Kevin Murphy, Clay Steakley.
Following the promotional photo are several examples of fliers, newsletters and stickers that exhibit this new found focus on the South. Our images seem much tighter and much more unified than those of the Lounge Flounders.
Canebrake Quartet

Thursday January 8
9:00 pm

Bongo Java After Hours

Only five dollars!
Canebrake Quartet

April 9
12th + Porter
Playroom

9:00 PM

Canebrake

Quartet
"And they toiled, tuned the troubled spots, honed, sharpened, and prepared the way. And away they went over the ocean, across time zones - expanses of the Earth fell away behind them. They planned, they plotted, they proceeded - all for a little face to face chat with the English, all to spread the word of the mysterious four."


Oh, yes, loyal friends and subscribers.

We are on our way. On our way to bring a little Canebrake to the Brits. And you - yes, you - are invited to witness our dressed up hoedown of a dress rehearsal. This will be the very show that we will be presenting to our friends across the sea. The only difference will be that you are not English and we will be able to find our ways home after the show without the aid of a map.

So, be at Windows on the Cumberland on Friday, March 19 for a first peek at the London show and our new astounding Foot-Powered-Tambourine-Contraption - both are sure to revolutionize Europe. Don’t you want to be able to say you saw it first?

**Upcoming shows:**

- March 19 at Windows on the Cumberland
- April 22 at 12th & Porter with the great Park Ellis
COME ONE, COME ALL!

Witness the **fantastical** amalgamation of stomp and holler joy and vituperative squeeze-box bombast that cannot be found anywhere on Earth other than with Reverend Fantastic’s one and only . . .

CANEBRAKE QUARTET

At the World Famous 12th & Porter Playroom

On **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 2ND**

With the Great Park Ellis

> And featuring the Henry Bros. and other Serendipitous Spectacularities! <
"MONSTERS OF SMUDGE"

MATTHEW RYAN
MACK STARKS
SARAH SISKIND
CANE BRAKE QUARTET

FRIDAY, MARCH 16
12TH & PORTER • 9:00 P.M.
Chapter 4:

The South

I did not intend to do it; but I did. I threw it on, all thick and syrupy. I let my diphthongs drag. I gave them no doubt as to where I was from.

“How are y’all doing tonight? Are y’all feelin’ good? Aw, man. I know we are. We are the Lounge Flounders from a little old place called Tennessee; and we are so proud to play for ya here tonight.”

It was the first time I’d ever really done that—played up the Southern thing—enhanced my natural accent, and to do it in New York City of all places. I’m not so sure why I chose there to begin.

It was really just one of those things. It was by no means premeditated. It was really, if you want to know the truth of it, just a reaction to environment. We were playing a showcase for label executives at a club called The Mercury Lounge—they were supposed to be getting a sense of who we were, of the band’s personality, of just how they were supposed to go about selling us.

I was nervous from the moment we pulled on to the Jersey Turnpike, not because of the showcase but because I felt alien. I felt the need to maintain constant vigilance, to constantly look over my shoulder. We hadn’t even left the van and still I felt as if someone was behind me, stalking me, waiting to take advantage of a Southern rube.
There. That’s the real truth of it. I felt unsophisticated, small-town, somehow unworthy of the city. I felt I would stick out, be noticed, that I would be obviously different.

All day long I kept my head down. I trained my gaze on the sidewalk. I did not look up. I did not meet the eyes of passing strangers. I followed all the New York rules. I tried my hardest to just blend in.

But that night at the club when the lights were focused on me, when I was the center of attention—I don’t know, the South just kind of took over. I asserted my difference. I let my allegiances be known.

Southern author Walker Percy once pointed out in an interview the difference between himself and other Southern authors. He explained that he preferred the “here and now” to “the backward glance,” to write about the modern South, while other Southern authors seemed dead set on reliving the mythic past (O’Gorman 2002:100-101). He insisted that “‘The aspiring novelist in the sunbelt’ . . . can’t go back to either ‘Faulkner’s Mississippi or O’Connor’s Georgia,’ but must instead realize that ‘over there just beyond the interstate loom the gleaming high-rises of Atlanta’” (2002:101). This prompts the question, in this age of mass culture, in this time of cable television, fast food, and mass production, is there even a need to classify any artist as Southern? Is there any regionalism left?

I was particularly curious to find out if rock musicians in Southern scenes
felt any allegiance to, or influence from, the South. Rock and roll, though some say it was birthed in the South, belongs to the world. I wondered, was there any sense of regionalism left?

Of the musicians I interviewed, many were reluctant to call themselves *Southern* artists, or identify their musical styles as particularly Southern, but many did express a great connection to the region. Whether or not they chose to label themselves as Southern, the South was clearly a part of what they did. To a certain extent the prevalent attitude is similar to that expressed by Bobby Bare Jr. and Mike Grimes in the previous chapter: Be who you are. Be authentic.

Sometimes that authenticity involves a person’s accent—not disguising it. As David Henry related:

We’re Southern and we’ve never made any attempt to hide that. I mean, we open our mouths and we sound like a bunch of guys from Macon. Because of that, a lot of people try and push us into country music . . . [But] you can be a pop band and still sound Southern . . . Maybe that’s another thing about Southerners—they tend to have a lot of pride, whether its well founded or not. It’s just like [puts on a mock Southern accent], “I’m stickin’ with it—wrong or right.” (Henry 2004)

Sometimes it comes through in the way a band decides what to call itself. Henry continues,

We actually named the band the Piedmont Cooks. And we were very sensitive to, like, we wanted to have a name that reflected something regional. Macon is right on the Piedmont. And the “cook”’s part came from the Bob Dylan’s song “Tangled up in Blue” where he has a line that says “I was working in the north woods as a cook for a spell.” And we thought, “we can’t really be the North Wood Cooks, but that’s funny. We really did have a sense of place. We wanted to identify that we were from Macon—at least that we were from that area. (Henry 2004)
Sometimes the authenticity comes through in the lyrical themes presented by groups. But, as Walker Percy stated, those themes do not always have to relate to the South’s mythic past. They can reflect current Southern themes. Henry reflects,

The only thing that gets me about that stuff, too, is that it always feels like, it’s a name [the label Southern rock], but people, at least thematically, are always looking into the past . . . That’s something that Ned and I are aware of. We can be a Southern band and look forward too. It doesn’t have to be—we’re not just singing about trains, we’re not singing about, whatever, plowing and all that stuff. I mean, that stuff is very much ingrained; you know you can’t really get rid of it. But that’s something that always gets me, when you hear Southern artists, is that they seem to get stuck, kind of in a time warp, sometimes. All they want to talk about is pre-1930 or something—pre world war two. Whether that’s the subject matter for their lyrics or how they shape the song—it just sounds like something that’s already been done.

I think it’s so important for Southern artists, and it’s true for any region, to hold on to their identity. Its kind of sad how regionalism in this country is evaporating. You know, all the girls dress like Rachel on [the television show] Friends. We all go see the same movies, watch the same T.V.—listen to the same bands (which is great for those bands).

But it’s so refreshing when someone comes out [who is original and] possesses a sense of regionalism . . . I’m hoping that that will be a charm to some of the new music we’re putting out these days. Again, something that feels real genuine.

I think as many people who sort of identify with the geography and try and do their art, there are just as many who want to go in the opposite direction . . . But I think that those people are still responding to that thread that runs in the community. People who are almost like: “Well, we’re not going to do that bluesy jam thing. We’re going to do what that’s not. And that is this. It’s almost, in a way, that they we’re having to respond. They we’re having to be the anti-jam band, or the anti-kind of Southern rock thing. And they’d go off and do these sort of New York noise sounding projects. So it’s kind of funny—in a way, even if they didn’t want to do it, they were still being influenced by it by what they wouldn’t do. They wouldn’t pick up an acoustic guitar. They wouldn’t be caught dead singing three-part harmony.

There is an identity here [in the South], and whether you accept it or reject it—it pushes you one way or another you go toward it or away from it.
I think regionalism has suffered mightily in the last thirty years. Conglomeration radio networks, just a few record labels being around anymore. I think its one of the great tragedies . . . the loss of regionalism. (Henry 2004)

Tommy Womack also believes that his Southern-ness comes through in the way he talks. And, like Henry, he believes that we are in danger of losing our sense of self as it relates to place. As he says,

You hear it in my voice a lot because I’ve got a—I’m told I have a thick Southern accent. You hear it in a lot of my lyrical themes: the boredom of small town living—the disconnectedness of it, the seeing of all the exciting stuff that happens on television that is beamed to you, losing your own regionalism by seeing television broadcasts from New York and L.A. all your growing up life. A sort of dis-affection there, a disillusionment, that’s in my music. That’s in all my lyrics. And I think that’s sort of a Southern thing.

See, we lost the Civil War and kept losing it for another hundred and fifty years. We kept getting beat down and considered hicks—incapable of producing any sort of art that wasn’t inherently Southern (i.e., hick-ish, or red-neck, or dumb) somehow. There is certain anger in my music and in other people’s music just wanting to plant a flag and assert that we are here and we are intelligent. We are special people. (Womack 2004)

**The South Rises**

The Flounders ended. Canebrake began. I was left wondering: What do I do to make things different. How do I remain in the same city—a city where people know me, know who I am, know that I was a Flounder—and change my performing persona?

I was sick of coming up with silly stage banter. Honestly, I just wasn’t any good at it. I wanted to play a character—with lines, with a script. I wanted to know what I was going to say. When I asked Clay, the band’s resident thespian, what I should do, he told me that he had always liked what I did in New York. “You know, that high-pitched Southern street preacher thing. I think you should be him.”
And so I was. Once again I played up my Southern-ness, only this time I created a context for it. I was the evangelist for the mysterious four—The Canebrake Quartet, the watchers in the woods. I imagined the Quartet as the fore fathers of a Southern storytelling cult. They sat in the woods and waited for life to float by. They preserved what they heard. Life is in the telling. I began incorporating family tales into our live shows—actual stories my grandmother told me. I changed them a bit, tried to heighten the drama. Sometimes they worked. Sometimes they came off as self indulgent. But one thing is for sure, by becoming a character, by playing someone else on stage, I finally felt like I was being honest.

For some, arriving at that conclusion, that you should simply be who you are, that you should assert that you are here and that you are special, is not always simple. It can take time. Patterson Hood of the Drive-By Truckers, a band that is currently taking part in a sort of Southern rock revival, spent a great deal of time attempting to obscure his Southern roots.

Being from Alabama [the Southern aesthetic] is going to be there irregardless. And you can either run with it or rebel against it. And I think for a long time I kind of rebelled against it and ran from it. Looking back on some of the stuff Adam’s House Cat [Hood’s first band] did in the eighties, you know, to some extent I cringe . . . It’s like things happen that are so absolutely undeniably Southern. I’m like, why didn’t we just run with that a little bit? That really could have been cool. But instead we were ashamed of those things and tried to play them down. We hadn’t really found out who we were yet as artists. So we were still trying to be what we thought we really ought to be as opposed to what we really were. And I think sometime around the time of forming this band, The Drive-By Truckers, was really right in with the time when I really had figured out who I was and who I am as an artist and how to proceed. Of course that also was when I got turned on to old-timey country, and became as an adult, a fan of some of the music that I
probably complained about when I would hear my granddaddy or great uncle playing them around the house as a kid.

You know, it was like: “Loretta Lynn. What!!??” Then it was like: “Oh, Loretta Lynn. Alright.”

When I was in high school I was listening to the Clash and the rednecks in the parking lot were listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd. And I thought I was cooler than them. I’m not saying I was. But I thought I was.

In my thirties I moved to Athens where anyone yelling “Free Bird” [Lynyrd Skynyrd’s popular Southern rock anthem] in the back of the room is being ironic, as opposed to really meaning it and will kick your ass if you don’t play it—which is where I come from . . . All of a sudden, being free from having someone shoving it down my throat, I was able to discover it as an adult, and able to discover it on my own terms. Look past the good ole boys in the parking lot at high school and look at it for its songwriting or its playing or whatever, and realize how really amazing a lot of that stuff was. Because a lot of it really is great. It is very well written—very well-written songs.

The Southern character—what we were addressing [in the album Southern Rock Opera] for all its history of racial prejudice and bible fanaticism, you know, some of the most beautiful and credible art ever made has come out of the South, has come out of this region . . . This region is very much like America in general, only with, under a magnifying, with a little magnifying—with the extremes magnified. It’s like the character of the Southerner isn’t that different from the character of the northerner. It’s just a little bit more extreme in both directions. The dualities are a little more pronounced. And that is my theory anyway.

One criticism we got a lot . . . was people saying, “Well, the Southern thing is pretty poorly written because it keeps contradicting itself.” And its like, well, that’s the point. It’s supposed to. Yeah, every line is actually, there should be something to contradict every line on there. That is the whole point of the song.

There was that whole genre that got called Southern rock, and people call us that sometimes. And, you know, when I was researching the Skynyrd stuff for The Southern Rock Opera, I saw over and over—back as far as old interviews . . . when Ronnie Van Zandt was still alive, talking about hating it when people referred to them as a Southern rock band. He was like, “We are a rock band and we are from the South. You know, rock comes from the South; and we come from the South. But we’re not just a Southern rock band” . . . When we get lumped in to a Southern rock thing, if it causes more people to come to a club on a given night, and give it a chance, fine and well. But it’s not what I think. I just think of us as a rock and roll band from the South. And that sums it up. People say, “Well, it’s kind of got some country in it.” Well, yep. So did
Elvis. So did Carl Perkins. So did the people who invented rock and roll. And so did the Rolling Stones. (Hood 2004)

Hood, like Womack, takes something of a defensive position when relating the ways in which he chooses to embrace his Southern heritage, the ways in which the region comes through in his art. Perhaps that defensiveness is part and parcel of the Southern identity. There is a pronounced duality in the South, and contradictions are still very present. And as Womack says, perhaps the South and Southern artists are still fighting, and losing, the civil war. Perhaps there is still some sort of over-arching inferiority complex.

But, as Percy stated, we can not ignore the “gleaming high-rises of Atlanta.”

There is a modern aspect to Southern life. It is not all about the “backward glance.”

For Park Ellis, Athens band R.E.M. provides a nice bridge between old and new South.

R.E.M. was my Beatles. There sound was very captivating and very, Southern. It felt like it was coming from where I was. It had a regional flavor to it for sure—those early R.E.M. records. And they couldn’t—they weren’t very good at their instruments, technically; but they had this great sound. So I started kind of gravitating towards that . . .

It was an impressive part of their [R.E.M.’s] sound. I felt like they were really using Southern influences in their lyrics and their music, and I liked that. It was definitely sort of a “home team” kind of attitude. I felt like they reflected their region in their music—but in a very new and cool way . . . I thought that R.E.M. took [Southern rock and blues traditions] and buried them in this sound that was fresher.

R.E.M. tied in to Faulkner for me. R.E.M. was Southern in theme, but to me they had a more reflective approach to it [than groups such as Lynyrd Skynyrd]. You know the Southern literature of Faulkner and the people who followed them, and [Flannery] O’Connor, was less about, “Hey I’m from the South. I’m proud of it,” and more about, “Let’s take a look at: What is the South? And, What does it mean? What’s going on down here?” (Ellis 2004)

While Ellis enjoys the modern approach of R.E.M., he is still drawn to themes that seem to stem from a more antiquated South:
Themes of city versus country always work their way [into my work] because I’ve always lived in the city and spent a lot of my life trying to get away from it.

Mr. Lytle [member of the Vanderbilt University based Agrarians—a group of Southern authors that included the likes of Alan Tate and Robert Penn Warren]—that was an important discovery for me—meeting him up there [in Mont Eagle, TN], reading one of his books, and discovering him as an accomplished writer that sort of had a place in Southern fiction, then meeting him for real and hearing him talk about art, and his philosophy of art that tied in with his general philosophies which were Agrarian based—him being part of the Agrarian movement. I was very attracted to that. And I don’t think it’s any sort of idea that originated with them—like any other idea it has popped up in a lot of different forms in a lot of different times. But I felt an immediate attraction to the Agrarian ideas of the process—of society since industrialization becoming a very product-oriented society, and that even, well, and that men and women—the human being was not being fully exploited or fully nurtured by the modern industrial, or post-industrial society.

That’s been an idea that still consumes me today—especially with computer technology. Everything that he talked about with industrialization is still an interesting and important topic now.

You think about all that stuff and you think about yourself last. You don’t turn that spotlight on yourself until later. But I stopped really trying to make a living at it [music], mainly because I couldn’t pay the bills, but also because it had become a very frustrating activity . . . that philosophy took on a lot of personal meaning when I realized that I had gotten to the point where I was trying to write songs that would appeal—to this or that record company, or this or that person . . . Music felt like a very pressure-oriented, and no longer a very spiritually sustaining, activity. It had become drudgery. (Ellis 2004)

Sometimes it ends that way: a philosophy—this particular one just happens to relate to the South, this particular issue is larger than region—can kill the initiative to participate in a scene.

Womack reveals a similar feeling (interestingly enough they are also revealed in relation to Southern identity),
I see myself as a Southern writer, a Southern person. As a musician, I don’t know so much, I feel like my best musician days are behind me. I’ve done my bit, you know. I don’t feel the kinship to music that I used to. You know, music doesn’t seem to define people like it used to. Seems like it went a few generations where what you listened to and what music was your favorite really meant something. And to kids now-a-days, I don’t really think it does. They are so barraged with other influences, and information and media that they can’t, you know . . . God-bless-‘em, they can’t decide what their influences are. (Womack 2004)

So, is this a generational issue? Are the artists I interviewed, artists who identify with the South, fading away? Are they slipping out of their local music scenes? That is yet to be seen. Patterson Hood still seems to feel connected to music and the South, as does David Henry. Although this identification with region may one day fade, I feel that it is in no immediate danger. And I think that I can state with some confidence that region can have an influence over a scene’s identity.
Conclusion

There are many factors that come together to create a local music scene. Region and landscape greatly contribute to a scene’s identity. These elements help determine a scene’s character. They are, however, meaningless without the people, the individuals, who make up a scene. It is, after all, only through the effort and imagination of these people that meaning and identity are created and maintained. The resulting culture creates and gives meaning to landscape; it responds to the culture of the region that encompasses it.

Members of a scene who are native to the region in which their scene is located sometimes experience contradictory emotions regarding their native culture. The culture of the southern United States holds influence over the rock scenes of Athens and Nashville. As we heard from the artists interviewed for this work, Southern musicians taking part in these music scenes sometimes find it difficult to identify themselves solely as Southern artists. At the same time, they find it difficult to completely deny the culture of their region. These musicians contend and grapple with questions of how to reveal their Southern-ness. This struggle can be seen as a shared characteristic of both the Athens and Nashville rock scenes, making itself visible in lyrical themes, and musical
styles. It comes through in personal philosophies, private conversations and public interviews.

We have also seen the ways in which a city’s landscape affects a local music scene. This influence is more specific than region, focusing in on a city’s neighborhoods, buildings, and streets. Members of scenes both react to meaning inscribed on, and inscribe meaning upon, those scenes’ landscapes.

Athens scene-sters (again, comprised not only of musicians, but of fans, technicians, store-owners, etc.) respond to the scene’s history as it is represented by the city’s architecture. Buildings serve to aid memory. They come to represent the activities that took place within them. Scene members reverently pot out the house in which the B-52’s gave their first performance. They proudly direct attention to a downtown loft, identifying it as the original home of the 40 watt club, the venue that played host to many of the early Athens scene’s most prominent acts.

Pylon, Love Tractor, and R.E.M. all played the 40-watt. The people who bore witness to these shows keep them alive by sharing their memories. By fixing these memories to a specific location they change the landscape. And so, a guided walk through downtown Athens becomes a trip back in time, the second floor office transforming into a smoke-filled bohemian art palace.

These points of pride, these buildings and landmarks help increase a scene’s solidarity. They provide the scene with a focal point, with something to tangibly represent its time depth. They can gesture and say, “This represents our history; this is
our legacy.” This feeling of unity, this connection of culture with space, inspires further connection. From it emerge new works of art: new songs and new stories.

Nashville’s scene is by no means lacking in these types of landmarks. The city is rife with music history. Much of this history is proudly claimed by members city’s rock scene. Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, and Willy Nelson (among many others), musicians who are just as influential in the world of rock as they are in country music, have all left their impressions on Nashville. This history is shared by both the country and rock scenes in Nashville. Both are by turns inspired and intimidated (sometimes it just seems impossible to live up to the past) by such a rich and influential history.

In addition to the rich landscape of landmarks and buildings representing country music in Nashville, there are those places that encapsulate the local rock scene’s history. As is the case with Athens, Nashville artists enshrine these landmarks in songs and stories. They identify the landscape through song and conversation. That song and conversation fixes extra significance to place for those within the scene. A neighborhood street with all its comings and goings, the human interactions taking place upon it, becomes the subject of a song (see the mention of Paul Tyson’s “Neighborhood” in chapter 2). A coffee shop or bar that serves as a meeting place for local scene-sters becomes home to a million conversations, a million dreams revealed, and a million schemes hatched. From that point forward that bar, that coffee shop, or that song represents the scene for its members.
This is the same for Nashville as it is for Athens. The buildings and streets are, of course, different, but the affect is the same. The scene is influenced by landscape. That influence inspires further influence as the members of the scene add significance and meaning to the existing landscape. Again, this helps to unite members of a scene, providing them with common points of pride, and a common base for the cultivation of nostalgic musing.

There is, however, a significant difference between the landscapes of Nashville and Athens. That difference proves significant so far as the character of Nashville’s rock scene is concerned.

Whereas Athens is primarily known for its rock scene, Nashville is noted more for its country scene. The two scenes existing in Nashville, as stated earlier, do share common influences. They share a common landscape and a common region. But, one overshadows the other. The industry that supports the country scene (particularly the record labels on Music Row) is focused primarily on country music. It, as a general rule, does not concern itself with the affairs of the local rock scene. As David Henry stated, a rock band in Nashville looks elsewhere for a record deal, even though most major record labels have offices in Nashville:

You get your deal out of New York, or Boston, or L.A.—you know, some other place. I really don’t know many people at all—that I work with—that get their deal out of Nashville. They all have to hit the road and find it somewhere else. (Henry 2004)

This leads to some tension between the two scenes. Some members of the rock scene feel under appreciated and overlooked. This feeling is evidenced in the presence of
the Nashville Curse, and in issues pertaining to authenticity discussed amongst the members of the rock scene. As Mike Grimes and Bobby Bare Jr. suggested earlier, some acts go to great lengths to disguise the fact that they are from Nashville in order to avoid any stigma that country music may hold in the eyes of other rock scene-sters. It also brings about the question: Are artists more successful if/when they simply admit to being who they are and where they’re from instead of trying to obscure the truth? The answer to this question is open to debate. The fact of the matter is that this question is a defining characteristic of the Nashville rock scene.

Region and Landscape are by no means the only factors contributing to a scene’s identity. The individuals who make up the scene, its artists, technicians and merchants all contribute to a scene’s identity, just as the scene influences theirs.

Certain scenes prove alluring to certain individuals because of their [the scenes’] unique attributes. Athens’s bohemian reputation calls to some, while Nashville’s abundance of recording studios, and seemingly endless supply of talented musicians, beckons others. These individuals arrive at their respective scenes. They respond to the atmosphere. They are influenced and shaped by the connections scene-sters share with region and landscape. They respond to the talents of other musicians. They respond to the comments of soundmen and studio engineers, to the response of music fans, and to the criticism and praise of their fellow musicians. They assimilate. They are integrated into the scene. They claim membership. They call the scene home.

They are not, however, completely subsumed by the scene. They also affect the
scene. Their presence adds another voice, another flavor. Sometimes a newly arrived
musician or band revives a scene that appears (to some) to be fading (See Grimes’s
comments on Joe, Mark’s Brother in chapter 1). They help to define the scene even as it
defines them. The influence is mutual.

Further Questions

The influences listed above (Region, Landscape, etc . . . ) are but a part of the total
influences that act upon a local music scene. In the future it would be interesting to
investigate the ways in which musicians arriving from outside a scene’s immediate
cultural region affect local scenes.

The interplay of local music scenes and local government is another topic worthy
of investigation. What do local governments do to support and nurture local scenes?
How do they hamper that growth? How do other industries and businesses located within
a scene affect it? Does a strong local music scene indicate that there is a strong interest in
visual arts? In theater? All of these questions may be asked in further studies.
Epilogue

A Comfortable Place

One day I returned. I found my old place, took a seat and let the memories take hold. Bongo Java, home to countless hours of idle dreaming, of conversations with fellow musicians in search of a way to fill a dead afternoon, of shows and introductions, it was home to a significant part of my Nashville scene.

I stare out of the front window, see the picnic table where I was interviewed by a Nashville journalist—my first major interview. At the end of that set of stairs, beyond the Bongo After Hours marquis lies the one-time home base for Canebrake Quartet. I found inspiration for songs amidst the paperbacks in the back room—urging friends to pick lines at random. I built stories around the disassociated phrases—recontextualized.

Here I filled my down-time. It was my home off the road.

I used to come here as Kevin Murphy, singer/songwriter, introduced to strangers: “You know, he sings with the Lounge Flounders,” or: “You know that tape I gave you? He’s the singer.” The scene gave me purpose. It gave me an identity. Bongo Java was the place I would go to have that identity re-confirmed.

Years passed, and now I am a stranger here. I recognize no one. If I did I would cease to be a stranger and become a used-to-be ("He used to sing . . ."). My identity would still be tied to the scene. It would just be termed in past tense.
My friend Bob in Athens is experiencing a similar crisis of identity. He’s a used-to-be as well. He used to play drums for the band Michael. We discussed our similar plights, reminisced and struggled with what we should call ourselves now that we fled our respective scenes.

We could not exactly be called expatriates. We hold no deep animosities. We did not leave due to massive ideological differences. We just changed. We walked away. Sure, there is an occasional pang of regret to be experienced, some spells of “what-ifs.”

In fact, the night of our conversation, we decided to go out and see a show. We decided to visit our pasts. The Drive-by Truckers were playing the Georgia Theater and we were going out to see them—just like old times.

We didn’t make it.

The sofa proved too comfortable, the thought of a crowded smoke-filled room too daunting. We opted instead for Chinese take-out and the Oxygen Network’s movie of the week.

Why do scenes sometimes fade away, die out, or slide into oblivion? Perhaps the answer lies in the story above. Perhaps Bob’s and my behavior that night can provide some clues. Maybe the scene-sters just grow tired. Perhaps they are seduced by television and other easy comforts of home. Maybe they just lose interest and there is no one to take their places.

Scenes do not always fade. Some soldier on. They may not look exactly the
same as when they began. Their identities change as the scene-sters change. One group moves in as the old group leaves to rest on comfy sofas. Cocky college rockers replace old metal-heads, a new breed of musician replaces the college rockers and yet a new group waits in the wings for their turn to influence and be influenced by a scene that changes faces but not place. Nashville remains Nashville, Athens is still Athens; they just change their look and their sound from time to time.
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