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The Relevance of Ryman Auditorium

There are few American cities with an identity as clear as the one Nashville, Tennessee holds. Dubbed “Music City”, Nashville is a music mecca with a rich music history. At the heart of this history is the famous Ryman Auditorium. Located in the heart of downtown, the Ryman is a huge center of music - people come from far and wide to see a show at this world-famous auditorium. Formerly the home of the Grand Ole Opry the Ryman has a deep history rooted in its veins. However, as the music industry struggles to sell records and increasingly relies on tour royalties to even survive, the question arises as to why artists prefer to play smaller venues like the Ryman. The Ryman continues to be a hot spot for entertainment due to several factors including its history, its acoustics, and its ability to create an intimate relationship with fans. No matter how much the entertainment industry changes, the Ryman Auditorium will always be a highly desired venue for acts to book.

The history of the Ryman Auditorium is rivaled by few. The story of the Ryman began with steamboat entrepreneur Tom Ryman in the late nineteenth-century. Ryman was already a successful businessman when he walked into Sam Jones’ tent on Eighth and Broad on May 10, 1890.¹ Sam Jones was an evangelical speaker who often discussed the evils of liquor and gambling. Even though Tom Ryman was entering that tent to antagonize Jones (Ryman’s steamboats were filled with saloons and casinos), Ryman left with a new peace of mind and ideals about what was morally correct. Jones’ speeches revitalized Ryman’s thoughts about money and alcohol and led him to abolish all liquor and gambling on his boats. These two men

¹ “History: It All Starts Here,” The Ryman Auditorium, accessed April 20, 2015. <http://ryman.com/history>

formed a powerful partnership and joined together in hopes of creating a common place where they could share their evangelical message to all different types of people.

Their dream brought forth the Union Gospel Tabernacle (the name came from Tom Ryman's desire for the building to unite people of all faiths), an auditorium that held its first event on May 25, 1890.² At this event, Sam Jones preached under a packed tent on the lot of the building because the actual structure was not even completed yet. The large community attendance showed promise and potential for the building. After seven years and over one hundred thousand dollars of fundraising, the Union Gospel Tabernacle was completed.³ At first it drew crowds from its religious events, often having to turn people away because the building was already at capacity. People from around Nashville loved coming to the Tabernacle to hear preachers talk about the Lord, pray, and socialize with like-minded people. A visit in 1886 by Dwight L. Moody (an evangelical speaker) prompted the newspaper *Daily American* to call Nashville the "center of the nation."⁴

With the success of the Union Gospel Tabernacle as a religious center came some struggles as well. The debt of the building was difficult to pay off, especially by only holding free evangelical events. In addition, Ryman saw the building as an investment by the people and believed that the citizens should have a say in what events were brought to the auditorium. This led to the space being used for other entertainment, seminar, and gathering purposes. These included performances by several Symphony houses around the country, namely Chicago, Nashville, and New York City. Because the Tabernacle was the largest venue in the south at this time, it became a draw for the United Confederate Veterans Association's reunion of 1897. This

² The Ryman, "History: It All Starts Here."

³ The Ryman, "History: It All Starts Here."

⁴ William Eiland, *Nashville's Mother Church: The History of the Ryman Auditorium* (Old Hickory, TN: Thomas Parris Printing, 1992), 16.

event was a part of the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Celebration that brought anywhere from sixty to one hundred thousand visitors to the heart of downtown Nashville. The Tabernacle was the center meeting place of this event, and it forced the construction of the upper balcony, a decision that doubled the capacity from three thousand to six thousand.⁵ It was decisions like this (renovating the stage, increasing dressing room size, and constructing a solid backdrop) that allowed the newly named Ryman Auditorium to house important cultural events like speeches from Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Taft. The Ryman also housed several prominent stage shows that brought top name talent to the venue such as Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*.⁶ Most importantly was the Ryman's ability to be the perfect location for the Grand Ole Opry.

The Grand Ole Opry is one of the oldest and most successful entertainment shows that has ever existed. The Grand Ole Opry started as a radio show called WSM Barn Dance in Nashville as a station dubbed WSM. The first show aired in 1925, but it was not until 1927 that the Grand Ole Opry got its current name. It started out as a traditional barn dance show whose popularity grew rapidly. Part of the reason for this was the fact that it started out near the Great Depression, an era where people could no longer afford records so they relied primarily on radio to get their much needed entertainment.⁷ People began crowding the radio studios where this show was being broadcast, and it inspired the station to move to a bigger venue. The Grand Ole Opry moved from a small theater that held five hundred fans to the Hillsboro Theater (the Belcourt). After that the show moved to a 3,500 capacity auditorium called the Dixie Tabernacle, and from there it moved to the War Memorial building where they had to start

⁵ The Ryman. "History: It All Starts Here."

⁶ Eiland, *Nashville's Mother Church*, 41.

⁷ "National Historic Landmark Nomination: Ryman Auditorium," National Park Service, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/71000819.pdf>

charging admission.⁸ After the War Memorial, the Grand Ole Opry moved to the Ryman Auditorium.

It was the Grand Ole Opry's move that threw the Ryman Auditorium into a spotlight. The move occurred in the year 1943 when the Opry was developing from a barn dance into a more sophisticated and progressive form of musical entertainment. The Opry was one of the only ways that new talent was thrown into the music scene at this time. Across the 31 year period that the Grand Ole Opry was housed at the Ryman Auditorium, several now-legendary names graced the stage as they were just beginning their careers. Hank Williams stepped onto the Ryman stage for the first time in 1949, and went on to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame as well as inspiring several later artists such as Norah Jones and Bob Dylan.⁹ During the era, Bluegrass music was born on the stage of the Ryman when Earl Scruggs and Bill Monroe played on the Ryman stage on December 8, 1945.¹⁰ Throughout the remains of the Opry's stay at the Ryman Auditorium, legendary artists such as Patsy Cline, Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl and Dolly Parton performed. Even Elvis Presley appeared one time, but with with no success. The Grand Ole Opry's audience much preferred the true country sounds, so Elvis was not received with open arms.

Perhaps the most famous individual to grace the Opry's stage at the Ryman was Johnny Cash. Cash first played at the Opry in 1956 and received a very warm welcome by the fans when he gave his legendary performance of "I Walk The Line." Johnny Cash immediately fell in love with the venue. It was a venue that held a lot of emotional value to Cash, as he met his wife June Carter Cash back stage where he told her that he would marry her. In 1968, twelve

⁸ The Ryman. "History: It All Starts Here."

⁹ "Hank Williams," A&E Television Networks, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/hank-williams-9532414#troubled-times>.

¹⁰ The Ryman. "History: It All Starts Here."

years after meeting, they got married. Theirs is one of the most well known love stories in the music world, and adds to the emotional history of the Ryman. More importantly, television was introduced to the Ryman, and not only did they film the Opry shows, but Johnny Cash himself began filming his own television show there. *The Johnny Cash Show* was a musical variety show that aired on June 7, 1969 to March 31, 1971 and spanned 58 episodes.¹¹ On this successful show, Johnny Cash played music with his band, as well as having several guests like Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, and Neil Young. When asked why he chose to film at the Ryman instead of at a more established Hollywood studio set, Cash stated “I love that old building. I love the feeling it gives me, and I love the people.”¹² That feeling Cash talks about related to an ability to connect with fans on a personal level, as well as realizing the historical significance of the Ryman - both reasons why the Ryman Auditorium was so popular.

Regardless of this spectacular history filled with glistening stars, the music industry has been struggling as of late to come up with satisfactory revenue. The increase of online streaming services has resulted in a severe decrease in record sales. The music industry has had to completely redefine and recreate its revenue streams because records are no longer making any money. As a result, a large percentage of the royalties in the music industry come from the touring side of the industry. The question remains: if an artist can sell out a larger venue like an arena, why would they choose the alternative of playing a smaller venue, even one with as much history as the Ryman?

One of these reasons (outside of the history of the place) is the far superior acoustical sound that the Ryman has over every arena. The Ryman Auditorium is a smaller space that has a higher acoustical potential. Built before there was electronic amplification, the Ryman had to be

¹¹ “The Johnny Cash Show,” CBS Interactive Inc., accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.tv.com/shows/the-johnny-cash-show/>.

¹² Eiland, *Nashville’s Mother Church*, 65.

built in such a way that would allow sound to carry far enough for the people in the back row to hear. The acoustics at the Ryman are the second best in the nation (only the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah has been said to have better acoustics) and is such an ambient space that a guitar pick can be heard hitting the stage floor from the back of the balcony.¹³ Even though the Ryman Auditorium was not built specifically for musical events, it is one of the best venues in the entire world for musical performances. Because it is a smaller venue, there are a lot of acoustical benefits that go along with that. Potentially the biggest bonus in the auditorium's size is the ability for the audio engineer to control the sound. In a large arena, the space is so vast that it is difficult to control every aspect of the sound - external noise has more time to distort the sound, the sound physically gets lost in the rafters before it reaches the listener, and it is more difficult to create a balanced mix that will sound the same throughout all different areas of the arena.

The actual materials of the Ryman Auditorium also lend itself to be a superior acoustical space. The interior of the auditorium is full of materials that are perfect for reflecting sound. These reflections let the sound gather a build so that by the time it reaches the listeners ears it sounds fuller than the direct sound would have been. This full sound is what the Ryman is known for. The ambience of every instrument as well as the clarity of each instrument adds to the musical experience at the auditorium. This ambience and clarity can be created in large because of the wood surfaces that are plenty. With ceilings and walls that are entirely made of wood (one of the most reflective surfaces), sound is able to bounce around and build, creating that full sound. In addition to the walls and ceilings, the Ryman's seating is entirely composed of wooden pews that have the same reflective properties. In addition to the wood, the stained

¹³ "House Acoustics of the Ryman Auditorium," Artists House Music, last modified April 2006, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.artistshousemusic.org/videos/house+acoustics+of+the+ryman+auditorium>.

glass windows at the back are also reflective surfaces that serve the same purpose as the wood. All of these elements create a sound that can not be beat, and has led to modern performers such as Grammy Award winning singer Beck call the Ryman is the “sweetest sounding room of all time.”¹⁴ The spotless acoustics are just another reason why the Ryman remains in the forefront of the live entertainment industry.

The size of the Ryman is also crucial to why people flock to the venue. The venue currently seats 2,362, a relatively small theater¹⁵. One of the keys in today’s entertainment industry is the ability for an act to make connections with fans. Because a majority of the money is made on the road, a solid artist/fan relationship is necessary to get people to come see a show. People love to feel emotionally connected to a particular act, and it is easier to do so in a smaller venue than it is at a larger one. A fan is more likely to share a moment with a particular act when they are less than two hundred feet away from them (as is the case with the Ryman) than when they are a basketball courts length away like they are during arena shows. They can make out facial expressions, hear a better quality of sound, and have a higher chance of meeting the act after a show at a small venue like the Ryman than with one who plays at an arena. During the show, there can be more give and take between the act and the fans. The fan can call out something and the artist can actually hear and reply instead of the voice of the fan being lost in the great space of a large venue. It is also easier for fans to make connections with each other at the Ryman Auditorium due to the pew style seating. All of these factors add up to a full experience that gives a sense of community and bond between the act and the fans that can not be replicated in a larger venue.

¹⁴ The Ryman. “History: It All Starts Here.”

¹⁵ The Ryman. “History: It All Starts Here.”

The Ryman Auditorium is not without intense competition in Nashville's live entertainment scene. Nashville is home to Bridgestone Arena, a large arena located on the same street as the Ryman Auditorium. In fact, these two popular venues are less than half a block away from each other. With a capacity of around twenty thousand, the Bridgestone Arena has seating for about six times as many people as that of the Ryman. According to Pollstar Magazine, the touring industry trade magazine, Bridgestone Arena ranked fifth in the world and second in the United States for ticket sales during the first three months of 2015 with 203,915 tickets sold (not including the Men's Southeastern Conference College Basketball Tournament in March).¹⁶ Bridgestone's success in its 19 year history has helped to revitalize the downtown area. By bringing in A-list talent, variety shows such as ice shows and circus shows, and the Predators Hockey team, this arena has shown potential to be on of the greatest arenas ever. Bridgestone Arena Senior Vice President of Booking, David Kells, stated "Night after night, fans continue to fill the seats at Bridgestone Arena because of the high-quality entertainment and top shows that seek out Nashville and Bridgestone Arena as a regular tour stop."¹⁷ Nashville is certainly a top spot in the entertainment industry right now, and having a venue that can compete in the ever emerging arena culture that shows a desire to have shows as lavish and grandiose as possible puts more pressure on the venues that are not arenas.

The Ryman has by no means backed down to the pressure of the more recent arena venues. To stay up with the times and to create a more pleasant environment for fans and performers, the venue has undergone some major renovations. The idea to start renovating occurred in 1974 when the Ryman Auditorium was set to be demolished after it was announced

¹⁶ Nate Rau, "Bridgestone Arena Ranks No. 5 in World for Ticket Sales," *The Tennessean*, April 8, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/money/industries/music/2015/04/08/bridgestone-arena-ranks-world-ticket-sales/25480657/>.

¹⁷ Rau, "Bridgestone Arena Ranks no. 5,"

that the Grand Ole Opry would be moving. Even popular Grand Ole Opry performers such as Roy Acuff thought it was a good idea to tear the Ryman down.¹⁸ At this time there was no main air conditioning, no dressing rooms for females, the Grand Ole Opry had moved to its new home, and the forecast for the Ryman Auditorium was bleak. It sat empty and untouched for a long period of time, until exterior renovations began in 1983. In this year, the roof was replaced, broken windows were repaired, and most notably, the pediment on the 5th Avenue side was repaired after it had collapsed.¹⁹ The pews were cleaned, the interior floors were cleaned and refinished, air conditioning was installed, and proper dressing rooms were added in the backstage area. In addition, a two-story section was added to the rear, specifically placed there so it would not compromise any of the original features. This addition was made to accommodate the modern needs of a major theatre. Modern sections were built including “offices, restrooms, concessions, a gift shop, and mechanical rooms”. The complete renovations cost about \$8.5 million.²⁰ It was after these renovations that the Ryman really began to pick up steam again and became a prominent venue once more.

In recent years, the Ryman has undergone even further renovations. To keep up with the Nashville tourist demand, a huge draw for the Ryman Auditorium in recent years, the venue has put \$14 million towards expansion. This expansion will include a new cafe, a multimedia tour that will contain videos accumulated throughout the venue’s history, as well as renovated restroom, merchandise, and box office space.²¹ Both sets of renovations have shown the

¹⁸ Nate Rau, “40 Years After Facing Demolition, Ryman Poised to Grow,” *The Tennessean*, July 13, 2014, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/money/industries/music/2014/07/11/years-facing-demolition-ryman-poised-grow/12551953/>.

¹⁹ The Ryman. “History: It All Starts Here.”

²⁰ The Ryman. “History: It All Starts Here.”

²¹ Nate Rau, “Ryman’s \$14 million Expansion Will Add Cafe, Interactive Tour,” *The Tennessean*, June 26, 2014, *The Tennessean* accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/money/industries/music/2014/06/26/ryman-auditorium-expansion-nashville/11399039/>.

Ryman's desire to stay relevant and desired by artists and fans alike, and they have kept the Ryman modern while maintaining its historical identity.

These renovations keep the Ryman at the forefront of Nashville's music culture. It remains a favorite in the twenty-first century because of its history, its location, its acoustics, and its ability to remain a relevant venue. It can compete with the larger venues because it is such a staple of Nashville's music history, and because of that it brings in acts from all different areas of entertainment. In recent years, the Ryman has played host to acts such as Crosby, Stills & Nash, Florida Georgia Line, Ingrid Michaelson, Willie Nelson, Hozier, Sam Smith, Gabriel Iglesias, Martina McBride, and Loretta Lynn. These acts fill the spectrum of live performances, including everything from country to pop and folk to comedy. The wide variety of acts brings all demographics of people. Young fans come to see the pop shows like Sam Smith or Hozier while older people come to see more classic acts like Willie Nelson or Loretta Lynn. The Ryman has done such a fantastic job at being a staple in Music City that it has been awarded Pollstar's Theatre of the Year for five consecutive years (2010-2015).²² This honor proves that the Ryman Auditorium is one of the best places to perform in the entertainment industry, and acts from all different realms of the entertainment industry will continue to want to grace the historic stage.

The Ryman survives because it has found something far more meaningful than money. The Ryman Auditorium banks on the value of emotional experience. Performers do not want to play the Ryman because they will make a million dollars in one show - they play the Ryman because they have the opportunity to walk on the same exact stage as some of their heroes. Audiences do not go to the Ryman because they expect some lavish, extravagant production - they go to the Ryman because they want to be in the same room as some of their heroes as well

²² Juli Thanki, "Ryman Auditorium Named Pollstar's Theatre of the Year," *The Tennessean*, February 23, 2015, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/02/23/ryman-auditorium-named-pollstars-theatre-year/23885855/>.

as their current favorites. Both artists and audience members go to the Ryman so that they can experience an intimate environment where they can connect with each other. Even in modern times, people still go to the Ryman because it allows them to become a part of history simply by walking through the doors. The Ryman Auditorium is home to the greatest emotional experiences that exist in today's entertainment industry, and that is why people will continue to perform and attend the Ryman Auditorium shows in masses.

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