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Nashville as an “It” City

Austin, Dallas, Las Vegas, Portland—and now, Nashville. Music City is front and center, eyes wincing in the spotlight as America’s latest “it” city.¹ With an average of eighty-two people moving to town every single day, Nashville is currently experiencing growth at an astonishing rate.² Multiple aspects unique to the city are responsible for this constant influx of people; its entertainment and leisure possibilities are nearly limitless, it is home to pristine higher education institutions, and its job opportunities are abundant. However, Nashville has some work to do if it wants to sustain its current status. In order to remain America’s “it” city, Nashville city officials need to not only continue to make entertainment, higher education, and job growth priorities, but also restructure its public transportation system and build more hotels.

There is no question as to why Nashville is known, respectively, as Music City, USA. The heart of the music industry beats on 16th and 17th Avenues, the one-way roads between Wedgewood and Demonbreun that are more popularly referred to as Music Row. The chances of turning on the radio, flipping to a country music station, and hearing a song that is not entirely rooted in that hallowed stretch of road, is slim—if not impossible. Recording studios, publishing companies, performance rights organizations, and label headquarters are just a few examples of the way in which Music Row holds a tight monopoly on the music industry. And it is not all

¹ Severson, Kim. "Nashville's Latest Big Hit Could Be the City Itself." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 08 Jan. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

² "Did You Know....82 People Move to Nashville Every Day?" *Blog RSS*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

country music, either. Paramore, Jack White, and Kings of Leon are all prime examples of a successful other-genre presence in Music City.³ As sociologist Richard Florida put it, “Nashville has the highest concentration of music industry in North America”.⁴ While Nashville’s music aspect is partly responsible for its large job market, it also appeals to and brings in many tourists.

Because of its reputation as Music City, the vast majority of touring artists are sure to include Nashville as a stop. Venues range from the historic Ryman Auditorium and the Grand Ole Opry House, to the newly constructed Schermerhorn Symphony Center, to larger stages such as Bridgestone Arena and Nissan Field. It is somewhat of a right of passage for any artist on their way to adding their handprint to the wet concrete of music history to play for an audience at the Ryman. The lack of necessity for artists to visit other southeastern cities, aside from Atlanta and occasionally Louisville, makes Nashville a destination for many concertgoers in the region. Traditional tour stops are not the only draw for music lovers—CMA Fest, the CMA Awards and the events in the week surrounding it, the Tin Pan South songwriters’ festival, and the All for the Hall Benefit Concert are just a few events that bring people in. Occurring each June over the span of four days, CMA Fest is America’s country music Mecca. In 2014, average daily attendance reached 80,000, and those visitors spent a combined total of \$39.3 million at the festival.⁵ While those numbers are mind-blowing enough on their own, another number speaks to the true draw of the event: 665. On average, attendees traveled 665 miles to witness the magic that is CMA Fest.⁶ In addition to CMA Fest, the CMA Awards are held annually each November at Bridgestone Arena. In 2013, 16.8 million people tuned into the event live on television,

³ "Beyond Country: Not Your Father's Nashville." *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ "CMA Fest: By the Numbers." *Nashville BizBlog*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

⁶ *Ibid*.

shining the spotlight bright on Nashville.⁷ In the spring of each year, Nashville makes evident that it is, in fact, the “Songwriting Capital of the World” as well. Tin Pan South brings upwards of 300 songwriters from all over the world (although most of them do not have to travel much beyond their driveway, since they reside in the capital of their craft) to play their songs writer’s round-style in various venues around town.⁸ Admission for this festival is difficult to track, as guests that do not have a pass pay with cash at the door of the venue they are visiting, but attending any round the festival has to offer gives a direct look into the impact it has on both the economy and Nashville’s reputation as Music City. Yet another pseudonym was recently given to the city by Keith Urban and his friends at the Country Music Hall of Fame: “Mashville”. With his annual benefit concert, “All for the Hall”, Keith brings in talent that spans all genres to play on Bridgestone’s stage. This year’s show, themed “Mashville”, featured performances from various artists, ranging from Luke Bryan to Peter Frampton. While country music was the focus, the theme itself speaks to the variety of music genres present in Nashville. The show racked in \$750,000 in revenue, and while the entire amount was donated to the Country Music Hall of Fame, that number once again reveals the importance of music to the city itself.⁹ Case in point, Nashville has earned the right to be known as Music City, and city officials need to continue to brand it that way in order to maintain its “it” city status.

While music is certainly the prevalent form of entertainment supporting Nashville’s booming economy, it is not the only form. Nashville has its fair share of sports as well, with two professional teams and several amateur and college teams. The Nashville Predators NHL team

⁷ "CMA Awards Ratings Down a Bit From Last Year." *Billboard*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

⁸ "The Story of Music City." *Nashville, Tennessee Guide to Nashville Tourism and Visitors*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

⁹ "All for the Hall 2016 Becomes Merle Haggard Tribute Show." *Taste of Country*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

calls Bridgestone Arena home, with the Tennessee Titans NFL team across the river at Nissan Field. The Nashville Sounds (the Triple A-affiliate to the MLB Oakland Athletics) play at First Tennessee Park as well. In recent years, Nashville has hosted various premier sporting events, including: the 2014 NCAA Women's Final Four basketball tournament, the 2016 NHL All-Star game, the annual Franklin American Mortgage Music City Bowl, the annual Country Music Marathon, and twelve consecutive SEC basketball tournaments.¹⁰ Events like these resulted in a direct economic impact of \$68 million for 2015 alone.¹¹ College sports are also prevalent throughout Nashville; Vanderbilt, Belmont, Lipscomb, and Tennessee State Universities offer both men's and women's sports at the Division One level. Simply put, sports play a significant role in Nashville's entertainment industry and overall thriving economy.

Music and sports aside, Nashville has other various forms of entertainment around every corner. Bars make up the majority of popular areas such as Broadway, Midtown, Demonbreun, and the Gulch—and it is hard to come across one that doesn't offer live music as entertainment at any given hour of any given day. In 2010, the city broke ground on the 2.1 million square foot Music City Center.¹² This new convention center offers space for various events, such as fan fairs, high school and collegiate conventions, and a multitude of other conferences. It sits adjacent to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum—yet another destination for residents and tourists alike. Film and television both possess a presence in Nashville as well. Established in 1969, the Nashville Film Festival is an annual event that has grown quite a following and was named “one of the top five film festivals in the United States” by the Brooks Institute.¹³ ABC decided to feed off of Nashville's emerging “it” city status with the creation of a television

¹⁰ "Sports: Producing a Major Impact." *Nashville Sports Council*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Music City Center." *Nashville's Convention Center*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

¹³ "Mission and History." *Nashville Film Festival*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

show—"Nashville"—based on and filmed in the city. Since its commencement four seasons ago, the show has created peak interest in the city and has undoubtedly influenced the influx of tourists in recent years. Although no direct official direct economic impact study has been conducted, the show has contributed greatly to showing Nashville in a positive light and doing so on a large scale; Randy Boyd, commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development, said, "In addition to jobs and economic impact, we also want to be smart and invest in films that portray our state in a good way. The Nashville show is just great advertising".¹⁴ The show has made such a visible impact that, in 2015, Governor Bill Haslam allocated \$8 million to incentivize ABC to film a fourth season and to keep filming and production local.¹⁵ Governor Haslam had his head in the right place with this decision, and city officials need to continue to make similar efforts to promote the entertainment industry in Nashville in order to maintain its current booming status.

Education is another example of something Nashville does well, and something that needs to remain at the forefront of consideration. Deemed the "Athens of the South" partly due to the educational opportunities available in the city, Nashville was the first Southern city in the United States to establish a public education system.¹⁶ Higher education is the current priority, with twenty-one accredited four-year and postgraduate institutions, eleven technical and vocational schools, and six communities colleges in the area.¹⁷ Belmont University is known for its contribution to the music and healthcare industries in the form of graduates, and Vanderbilt University is often referred to as the "Ivy League of the South". These institutions of higher

¹⁴ "Nashville' Receives \$8 Million From State for Season 4." *The Tennessean*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Nashville - Athens of the South." *About Travel*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

¹⁷ "Colleges & Universities." *Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

education create an influx of temporary residents as students, but those temporary residents often turn permanent thanks to the large job market and entertainment opportunities available in Nashville.

Even though Nashville is experiencing such a large influx of people (as a reminder, eighty-two people move to town every day), the city's unemployment rate is significantly lower than the national average—5.7% compared to 7.8% in 2012.¹⁸ With the music, healthcare, and television industries being as dominant as they are in Nashville, there is no question as to why unemployed people are few and far between. In 2012, it was projected that job growth would rise by 18% in the following five years, incidentally causing the unemployment rate to plummet further.¹⁹ A drive down Music Row is enough to explain the music industry's importance to the job market; buildings range from several stories to quant houses, but all of the establishments along this stretch of road employ members of the music industry in some fashion or another. According to the New York Times, "Half of the nation's healthcare plans are run by companies in the Nashville area".²⁰ A similar statistic is present in Nashville's for-profit hospital beds—they make up half of those in the entire country.²¹ As far as the television industry goes, Governor Haslam had good reason to spend money to keep "Nashville" alive. When the show is in production, it employs five hundred people full-time, with nearly 80% of those people being locals.²² The show also provides a supplemental income for thousands of locals that have appeared as extras. With a \$64 minimum for eight hours of work and overtime for any additional time on set, "Nashville" proves to be a helpful tool for anyone looking to earn extra cash while

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

being involved with a national television series. These rates and facts, supplemented by a cost of living at 14% percent less than the national average, make Nashville a promising place to live.²³

Although Nashville does exceedingly well in the entertainment, higher education, and job market departments, city officials need to reform the public transportation system in order to maintain and improve the air of greatness the city currently possesses. With an increasing influx of people comes a decreasing ease of navigability—and attempting to get anywhere in Nashville during rush hour is a testament to this. Because of the rapid population growth, Nashville is currently experiencing a lull when it comes to transportation as a whole. The city's roads and highways are constantly bursting with cars, but the primary form of public transportation—the Nashville MTA and RTA bus systems—does not offer an efficient enough alternative to get people out from behind the wheel. City officials are well aware of the problem, as they have three possible scenarios to fix the issue listed on their site, but action needs to be taken sooner rather than later. A core set of improvements are to be made regardless of the scenario chosen, including: improvements to existing routes, rebranding MTA and RTA services with a new & unified brand, better information to make transit easier to use, better facilities and amenities throughout Middle Tennessee, new fare collection options, improvements to pedestrian conditions to/from/around major transit lines, and better connections with places that are beyond walking distances from traditional transit.²⁴ The three scenarios are as follows: a comprehensive regional system, bus-focused expansion, and modest improvements.²⁵ In the time it takes for one or all of the three scenarios to be implemented in some form or another, city officials must also be conscious of road and highway conditions. The winters of 2014-15 and 2015-16 proved to be

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Future Transit Scenarios." *Nashville MTA/RTA Strategic Plan*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

²⁵ Ibid.

harsher than the norm, resulting in dilapidated blacktop. The lack of know-how (due to lack of past necessity) possessed by plow operators caused potholes abound—most of which have not been attended to or have been made worse by failed attempts at repair. Congestion is the primary issue concerning road conditions around the city. As Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck—authors of *Suburban Nation*—concluded, the car should diminish in importance in the future of urban planning. People, ideally, should be able to walk to where they need to go. Traffic creates headaches, parking lots enable people to drive, and a heavy traffic flow does not represent the ideal city model. The authors also claim that increasing the number of lanes increases congestion, rather than serving to aid in the issue—something that Nashville city officials should keep in mind as they attempt to accommodate the growing commuting population.²⁶ In sum, the current states of public transportation and traffic are major problems in Nashville, and if left unresolved will serve to diminish the booming status of the city.

Another issue threatens Nashville's status as an "it" city—the lack of hotels available. While efforts have been made to draw tourists in, those efforts have not been matched to accommodate said tourists. A prime example of this is seen with the Music City Center's lack of use compared to the potential it possesses. According to the Nashville Business Journal, "Several healthcare organizations, arguably a natural fit for Nashville because of its giant healthcare industry, have passed on Music City Center because of a lack of luxury accommodations, including The Association of Medical Colleges, The Endocrine Society, and the National Association of School Psychologists".²⁷ Furthermore, NBJ claims that "Tourism and hospitality experts say that the city needs between four hundred and one thousand more full-service hotel

²⁶ Duany, Andres (ed.) *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. (New York: North Point Press, 2000).

²⁷ "Why Music City Center Is Losing Out." *Nashville Business Journal*. n.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.

rooms in addition to the new eight hundred-room Omni Nashville Hotel for the size of conventions—about four times larger than those in the old Nashville Convention Center—now looking at Nashville”.²⁸ Sporting events, such as the men’s NCAA March Madness tournament, have also turned town Nashville’s bids to be a host city as a result. Cranes have become a seemingly permanent fixture of the Nashville skyline, but if those cranes are building anything other than hotels at this point, their uses are in vain. To provide full advantage of all the city has to offer and to reach full potential, Nashville must put the hotel issue at the forefront.

Nashville is currently experiencing its time in the spotlight as America’s “it” city. With endless entertainment and leisure opportunities in the form of music and sports, along with pristine institutions of higher education and a booming job market, there is no question as to why. However, Nashville has some work to do; if the city wants to remain an “it” city for long, officials must tend to the public transportation and road condition issue, while building hotels and continuing to prioritize entertainment, higher education, and job growth.

²⁸ Ibid.

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