

# NASHVILLE'S HISTORIC RECORDING STUDIOS

## Saving the Ghosts of Music Row



It was a routine Wednesday afternoon at Ronnie's Place recording studio on Nashville's legendary Music Row. Routine, that is, until Ronnie Milsap himself happened by to just hang, listen to some tunes and reminisce.

Now owned by Black River Entertainment, the studio is still known as "Ronnie's place" because of all the hit records Milsap made there during his time as the studio's owner and main tenant.

Nick Autry, Black River Studios general manager, remembers that day fondly.

"A few of us just sat in the studio with Ronnie, who wanted to listen to some songs," he says. "We sat there for hours and listened to his old records—right there where they were made. It was amazing. When Ronnie was ready to leave, he pointed to an exact spot in the room, where Nipper, the iconic RCA dog, used to (and still does) reside, and he said, 'Nipper, you still over there, ole boy?' He knew exactly where it was, even though he hadn't been in the building for probably 20 years."

Not much has changed at Ronnie's Place, save a few minor upgrades. That's by design. Call it the vibe. The mojo. The essence. Nobody can really put a word on what it is that makes these great old studios better than new ones. But whatever it is, nobody wants to lose it.

It's that special vibe that lures musicians to record there, and it could be the first thing to go with a major renovation.

Stories like Autry's abound from every recording studio that's left on Music Row. Thanks



The interior of Southern Ground Studios.

to a renewed interest in saving these hidden jewels peppered throughout Nashville, historic preservation has been brought to the forefront to protect buildings every bit as sacred to Music City as the pre-Civil War homes in Charleston, S.C., or New York City's Empire State Building.

RCA's renowned Studio A became national news in 2014 when it was nearly leveled and replaced with condos. Fortunately, musician Ben Folds and a group of local philanthropists stepped in to save the building and preserve the history made there, literally days before the condo deal was signed.

Also in 2014, the legendary studio built and owned by Cowboy Jack Clement was up for sale, and the condo and strip-mall vultures circled its prime Belmont Boulevard location. But Nashville-based music publisher and management firm Zavitsos Music Group came to the rescue. They bought the building with preservation in mind, working with the city

to rezone the home and studio, which is now a historic neighborhood landmark that can't be developed. The story landed on the front page of *USA Today*.

**"It was so important to us to preserve this studio because someone could have bought it and bulldozed it,"** Zavitsos CFO and partner Beverly Miller says. "This is Cowboy Jack's place. Johnny Cash made records here. So did Waylon Jennings. U2 recorded part of their *Rattle and Hum* album here. It was also a legendary spot where musicians would gather to play, write songs and hang out. Who knows what music came out of those parties Cowboy Jack was famous for hosting."

And because ZMG is fostering the same type of creative environment for its writers and musicians, they wanted the "vibe" and "mojo" that don't come standard in new buildings.

"When we saw Cowboy Jack's place, we knew the historical significance of it," says Eric

Hurt, ZMG vice president of creative and A&R. "It's important for songwriters to work in a place where they feel inspired. A lot of legends have come through these doors, and that's a constant reminder of why we do what we do."

### "Potential in the Air"

Brandon Bell, general manager for Southern Ground Studios on Music Row, agreed, saying their space, which was saved and revamped by musician Zac Brown, offers something intangible to those who come there to record.

"There's a feeling when you come in here of 'Well, it's been done before in this room, so why not me?'" Bell says. "There's potential in the air."

The building that now houses Southern Ground was originally built between 1897 and 1903 as a Presbyterian church. Later in its life, it was converted into Monument Records' recording studio, where, along with many other hitmakers, Kris Kristofferson produced his first three albums. Later, Neil Young would record *Prairie Wind* in that room.

In 2010, the building was shuttered and sitting vacant—until Brown's friend and musician Matt Mangano stumbled upon the real estate listing and emailed it to Brown with a simple message: "Hey, let's buy this place." He was half kidding, but Brown was full-on serious, and three months later, they had the keys to the building.

Brandon Bell remembers Brown and some others crawling through the space, looking at the low ceilings. Upon further inspection, they discovered a secret those ceilings had been hiding for decades.

"There was an old brick archway on one of the walls from back when the building was a church," Bell says. "Zac loves bringing out the original beauty of things, so he made the call to pull the ceiling down and expose as much of the brick as they could. The brick itself is incredible. They just don't make it like that anymore."

Mangano, who plays bass for Brown, says with a studio, the form is equally as important as the function. Every detail, from the wood grain to the lighting, from the smell to the quality of the hospitality, has a profound impact on the overall experience.



*The studio that was built and owned by Cowboy Jack Clement (top left) went up for sale in 2014. Cowboy Jack continued to produce music until shortly before his death in 2013. Among the many people to record in his studio were Johnny Cash (above), Connie Smith and Marty Stuart (left).*

Fleetwood Mac, Tom Petty, and Nirvana—now resides in Grohl's own studio just outside of L.A. Thanks to his filmmaking efforts, many people were schooled on how the creative combustion among artists makes a recording studio a special, historical entity.

That same sense of history pervades Nashville's Sound Stage studios, next door to Ronnie's Place. Built in 1970 by Mercury Records, Sound Stage houses two legendary rooms that churned out mega hits over 40 years ago for Mercury artists, including Jerry Lee Lewis and Tom T. Hall. Both rooms are still functioning today under the ownership of Black River.

Studio GM Nick Autry says more than 600 No. 1 songs were cut in the facility. That equates to more than a billion records sold that came out of these modest rooms on Music Row. Musicians ranging from Hank Williams Jr. to Miranda Lambert have recorded hits at Sound Stage, and virtually every George Strait album originated here.

Ronnie's Place was built in 1968 and purchased in 1972 by musician Roy Orbison. He would sell it to Milsap in the '70s, and, although the building has changed hands a number of times, it's still known for the Milsap-era magic.

Since that time, Kings of Leon, Alice Cooper, Phish, Lee Ann Womack, Waylon Jennings and Pistol Annies have recorded there.

Back at Southern Ground, Oliver Wood of The Wood Brothers has recorded two records and

worked as a producer on several others. He says the vibe of a studio can really affect the comfort level and an artist's or producer's ability to create.

"As an artist, you don't want an environment that's too much like an office or a lab," Wood says. "We want something more like a living room in a cozy house with warm lighting, comfortable furniture, and funky or inspiring artwork. The room can't be too sterile, or too cluttered—just comfortable and inviting. With a good vibe like that, we don't feel like we're working. It's more like we're hanging out and having fun, which is the best headspace for being creative."

### **Embracing the Mystery**

According to the current owners, Ronnie's Place is a bit mysterious, in that there isn't a lot of information about the history of it.

"It's just a little hole-in-the-wall place," Autry says. "We're digging new stuff out every day. We renovated a little bit but left it as is, for the most part. There is still some stuff in there with Braille on it, and we think that is so cool. We also have Ronnie's old piano. He recorded so many hits on that piano, and we get to use it every day."

He says what Nashville's studios lack in glitz and glamour, they more than make up for with the energy from everything that has happened previously in those rooms.

"The historic factor is key," Autry says. "Most of my favorite records were done at Sound Stage, and that's what led me to want to be an intern there, years ago. It wasn't then what it is now, but we still loved it. It had so much character. Why not take something that's awesome to begin with and update it, and make it look good again? You have the same-sounding room that all these great records were made in."

As for Cowboy Jack's place, unfortunately a good bit of history of the studio—known to the locals as the Cowboy Arms Hotel & Recording Spa—went up in smoke when the studio burned in 2011.

Hurt says Clement had to remodel the studio, but kept the original footprint in place.

**You can still walk into the same isolation booth where Johnny Cash recorded back in the day—but with fresh paint on the walls and new carpet.** That re-created version of

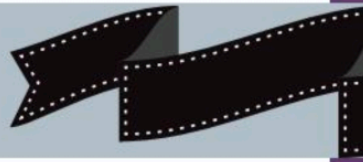
**"If a musician is having a fantastic experience, there's a great chance that the positive feeling or the vibe will translate to the music and will remain in the memory of that musician for years,"** Mangano says.

He remembers that when the ceiling and old insulation came down from the rafters, that's when the studio began to get its spark back. Brown shared this story when friend and Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl was shooting his "Sonic Highways" HBO series here. Much of the Nashville episode was shot within the walls of Southern Ground, with the two musicians dishing about the amazing vibe of the restored recording space. A line about the light coming through a set of windows uncovered during the renovation made it into the Foes' song *Congregation*.

### **Where Giants Walked**

Grohl first brought the importance of historic recording studios to light in 2013, when he filmed *Sound City*, a documentary about the legendary Sound City recording studio in Los Angeles. The building ultimately lost its fight with digital media and home recording technology, but not before churning out decades of hit records.

The now-legendary Neve mixing board from that room—a console that captured the likes of



the original footprint is vibrant and functioning today. In addition to producing bands and writer demos in the space, SiriusXM Radio's Outlaw Country is recorded live from the Cowboy Arms, pumping out tunes from Cash and many others who made their records in that same space.

Ironically, Outlaw Country was once hosted by Clement himself, whose quirky spirit still lingers all over the house and studio.

"When we bought the place, we inherited all of Jack's gear," Hurt says. "We have his mics and the mixing board he recorded his last album with. We hate to think what would have happened to all of this stuff if someone had torn this house down. But instead, Cowboy Jack will live on through this place, and we intend to honor his legacy by continuing to produce great music out of here."

### ***Keep the History Coming***

Unlike many historic homes or sacred places across the country that are preserved by being roped off and turned into museums, those in the recording industry prefer these studios continue to be used.

Nobody involved in resurrecting RCA's Studio A wanted to stop the music. Instead, they are pioneering new uses for the space, just as ZMG has done at Cowboy Jack's.

And those who see the value in these rooms, with that ever-present intangible quality, are banding together. They're forming associations, coming up with plans, developing historic overlays and zoning to ensure the condo monsters will have to look elsewhere for a carcass to pick apart.

According to Southern Ground manager Bell, session drummer Chad Cromwell assessed the development situation in Nashville perfectly. "It's like Nashville let the kids loose in the candy store and nobody's minding the register," Cromwell says. "It's like nobody was paying attention to preserving the exact thing that made Nashville what it is today."

"These studios are still why Nashville is so great," Bell adds. "The rest of Nashville probably wouldn't be what it is if it weren't for the music that came out of these great, old buildings."