

Keep The Tradition Alive:

An Examination of Division in the Memphis Music Scene

By: Nathan Robinson

I have loved music as far as I can remember. My parents are huge soul and R&B fans and I was brought up in church where gospel music was *the* central element. I have played an instrument ever since trying to squeak out a concert Bb on the clarinet in 7th grade beginning band. Now, I play the tenor saxophone for my college's jazz band and have picked up the keys along the way. I am not from Memphis. I hail from Chattanooga, Tennessee, but as a native of this state I had always been told by family and friends that Tennessee had two cities nationally renowned as musical powerhouses: Nashville and Memphis. This always brought me a sense of pride to know that I was from a state that was historically known for its musical output. Even though Nashville has branded itself as the Music City, I've always seen it more as the "Country Music City". I have never been the biggest country music fan and in fact have always thought it was the greatest irony that the banjo originated from the African continent. Thusly, even though I was proud of Nashville and respected it as the state capital, I was never quite starry eyed about it. Memphis, on the other hand was a different story. Apart from Graceland, the city has a claim on being the origin of the Blues, Soul, and Rock n' Roll as well as a very hearty Jazz tradition. Reading and hearing about Memphis' musical background always excited me and made an impression that the city was a musical hub of creative content and consistent production. I wanted to attend college in a city rather than a town in the middle of nowhere and when I found myself at Rhodes College in Memphis I truly had high hopes for my potential musical experience within the city. However, the reality of the current scene did not quite align with what I had concocted in my head. Before I got here, I thought that original local music and artists would be marketed and promoted much more than they turned out to be. This meant that it would take some effort and time to truly get to know the local scene, which has been a worthwhile and enriching experience and one that I widely recommend to others. I set out to grasp a greater understanding of the current music scene, how it got where it is, and most importantly where it is going. Though I am by no means claiming to be an expert of the Memphis music, this

essay is the result of my research and my perspective as a non-native Memphian into the current condition and narrative of the Memphis Music community.

Memphis gets a very bad rap. I am an outsider and growing up most of what I heard about Memphis was negative and that still has not changed. What has changed is my perspective. I have gone to college in this city for two years now and the experience has been a positive one. It's much easier to rag on places and people you've never been to and met. I like this city and I like its people. Locals are down to earth but kind here and I can't help but think that if the city was not nearly suffocated by the all the negative stigma placed upon it by the outside it would truly thrive. Nevertheless, negativity is powerful and self-hatred is a common sentiment within the city. It has been described to me many times that there are two types of Memphians: those who like the city and those who do not. Both sides can and have been criticized for being unsympathetic to the arguments of the other side, but at certain point negativity is no longer useful. Consistent critique and cynicism without attempt or action aimed at reform is utterly useless. So, for the people who genuinely love and care about Memphis, not only does it feel like they're fighting against labels placed on them by outsiders, but they're also fighting against the constant negativity of some of their surrounding peers. This makes cultivating a city-wide sense of optimism a near Sisyphean task; especially in the music community. In the words of Zac Ives co-owner of Goner Records:

There's a core group of people in the middle that love Memphis and then everyone else around it is like Oh man, we don't like Memphis, we don't like Memphis, we don't like Memphis" Sometimes its hard to talk everybody into the fact that what we go here is great. But it's not perfect. It's got a lot of problems. As long as you can

embrace the problems and recognize what's beautiful about it, then you're in an amazing place. A lot of times it takes leaving here to figure that out for people.¹

I, like so many, had always attributed music and playing music as near equivalent to happiness and leisure. So, when I truly found that musicians and members of the music community suffer from similar division and social obstacles that a vast population of the entire Memphis metro area experience daily, I was surprised. Surprised and then ashamed. I was ashamed for being naive enough to think that music and musicians were some sort of exception and the realities of socio-economic struggle just skipped over them. I was ashamed that I took my own abstractly platonic and utopian conceptions of music and projected them onto real people with real lives, struggles, hopes and needs. I had always wanted to get to know the music scene but it this made me realize that the people who know the music scene the best are the musicians and producers who live it. So that who I talked to. Via 8 personal interviews, a focus group, and a Curb Institute and Music Export Memphis hosted discussion at High Cotton Brewery, attended by over 30 people.in the music industry, I have gotten an array of firsthand accounts of the current conditions of Memphis music and the obstacles the music community still seems to face. The music scene in Memphis has been and continues to be a vibrant hotbed for natural talent but its artist's collective potential is suppressed by a cage threaded with backwards thinking as well as geographical, and racial division. This results in divided niche audiences who continually want to hear a specific genre, which in turn economically discourages cross-genre communication and collaboration. This lack of communication between artists stifles promotion of local talent. This all substantially contributes to a weakened sense of connectivity and community across the city. All in all, for a city that's looking to attract young adults with disposable income to invest in it, having a strong and healthy music

¹ Personal Interview with Zac Ives

economy that utilizes and promotes the abundance of historically local talent in the city would seem like an essential component of such a plan.

Due to restrictive traditionalist thinking Beale Street is now more of a tourist trap than the flourishing cultural center and musical economy it once was. Beale Street has come back as Memphis' big attraction when it comes to things to do in the city. It's historical background and its Congressional recognition as the "Home of Blues"² has tourist coming from far and wide. The problem is that the tourists are not so much fans of blues and soul as they are of the hit songs they attribute to those genres. Furthermore, the "true fans" of blues and soul insist that the standards and 70s rock hits are the only genuine forms of blues or soul. The result is deluge of cover bands playing "Mustang Sally" and like; thusly in the remaking Beale Street into an ode to past "glory days" it has been stripped of its original position as a place for aspiring artists to be heard and compensated for their own art. This unfortunate fact is exacerbated when realizing that often the people singing and bands playing and being paid for these covers of famous black music are not black. A shocking example was revealed in a focus group in which a black woman testified, "The musicians that I sing with are white. I found out—I went to LA a couple of weeks ago. While I was gone, they were still performing down here. I found out that they actually made more tips when I'm not there opposed to when I am there." While this doesn't mean that the particular venue paid her less, it does indicate the atmosphere, make up, and attitude of the audiences at Beale. I love music because I believes it connect with people from various experiences. I harbor no ill will towards white people who enjoy and or perform music originally made by people of color. Most white artists are on the scene because they genuinely love music and are booked because of familiarity and

² <https://memphis.com/places/fs/world-famous-beale-street/4b80228bf964a5206d5530e3>

availability. In the words of Jeremy Shrader a local jazz musician, trumpet player, and music educator:

...sometimes just by default it turns out being me and a bunch of white guys. Sometimes that's just because availability. I think you'll definitely see bands that are working that seem to be like they're more segregated. I hope that it's not by choice but again it's more about availability and familiarity. You play with who you know and who you went to school with or who you came up with. But I also see a lot of more integrated bands which sometimes by choice. And when given the choice I do try to make sure that it's representative of the music. I enjoy playing it. It's something that I put a lot of passion into. I like to see it well represented. I think that definitely extends to other genres too. Jazz is not exclusive to that. I'd like to see more integration.³

However, the disparaging lack of proportionality of black faces as well as R&B and hip hop acts that venues reach out to is definitely at issue today and is felt by the black community. Tonya Dyson a neo-soul artist and aide of the Memphis Music initiative says:

One of the things that I really focused on because I'm a business major was thinking how can we restore the face of black music and black art in Memphis. Cause again you hear the songs and the music and you feel a great appreciation for it but it's changed. We're not the ones that are doing it. I don't know it was an odd thing to encounter. Especially knowing the history and only having books and different things to get the knowledge of the city without being there. To get sold on this image and get here and be like... I've read as of recently they want blues, jazz, and soul to be universal. Especially in Memphis. They say 'Soul isn't a

³ Personal Interview with Jeremy Shrader

specific color.' Look at Stax. Those are black and white artists. If you would've asked those white artists at Stax they knew that they were white artists playing black music. They understood. What's so hard for you to understand? Again Columbusing...After a while if enough white people jump into the genre. It's for everyone. It is for everyone. It is universal but it is black music that everyone has accepted.⁴

Music is an art but for many it is just as much a profession and a way to make money. Currently black artists, young artists, and artists with original styles and material are being edged out of a market that was basically created by them. When asked about the overall community representation of acts on Beale Street Zac Ives agreed to the lack of accurate demographic representation and responded:

I grew up going to Green's Lounge in Orange Mound. Sometime in the late 90s it burned down. The idea that that stuff can't be happening on Beale Street is crazy. This town is full of super talented session guys from the 70s and 80s and we're losing them because they're older. But there's no excuse for those bands not to be down there [Beale] playing all the time. I think it's a shame. I think it sucks. It feels like [Beale Street] is there to be a tourist trap.⁵

Regardless, Beale Street secures a significantly steady flow of tax revenue for the city. So as long as tourists keep coming en masse and internationally to pay to hear majority white musicians/artists standard line up of rock n roll jukebox covers, the city government does not have much of an incentive to change Beale at all. And, why would they? In the words of John Paul Keith, a local guitarist/singer-songwriter and board member of the Memphis chapter of the Recording Academy:

⁴ Personal Interview with Tonya Dyson

⁵ Zac Ives Interview

There's a lot involved in Beale Street that effects the music and the politics. Beale Street is a very special thing because it generates so much tax revenue. I believe it's the number one tourist attraction in the state. It used to be. So, the city is very careful. They micromanage. There's a lot of factors there and I can't speak to all of them.⁶

Nevertheless, one must consider what has been lost. When asked about their opinion of Beale every musician I talked to agreed that Beale Street, Memphis' great musical attraction, was not an accurate nor fair representation of real Memphis music. While they appreciate the historical significance behind Beale they all seemed to agree or have the opinion that Beale was a tourist trap in the since that it is now only a shell of what is really used to be. Furthermore, some artists consider Beale as even more than just a tourist trap but also a trap for musicians as well. In a focus group with local musicians, I learned that amongst musicians Beale Street can be a real dead end where musicians find themselves playing the same venues, the same set list, and the same sub-par pay. In this way, musicians find themselves in stuck in a loop where they become financially dependent on playing similar gigs infuriatingly static set lists because venues frequently determine what songs the acts get to play. Only prestigious acts with great local or national acclaim seem to be free of these constraints.

For a musicians and artists who aim to make a living with their own music and unique styles the Beale Street music scene can become a vacuum of vitality to the extent where some have described it as an oppressive atmosphere that they strive to overcome. Young artists and new acts are often lulled and baited with dreams of making it big and do multiple full performances “for exposure” without any pay. Catrina Guttery, local music advocate and radio host of the rock station WREG 103 explains:

⁶ Personal Interview with John Paul Keith

So our own community has to understand too that not paying musicians to play is an issue as well. Musicians can't support themselves if they don't get paid if they just play for exposure... It's pretty common. I think it's because people sell it to musicians. "Oh, I'm going to give you a lot of exposure". I mean I'm always flying the flag for musicians need to get paid. It's a profession. It's a profession like me sitting here doing a Memphis music show on Sunday nights. It's a profession for a guitarist to go up and sing and write these songs and perform for 1-2 hours for people. It's a job at the end of the day.⁷

This undercuts the musical market and causes artists and musicians who are largely underpaid to suffer an even deeper pay cut. All of this culminates in many artists advice to others "Don't play on Beale." It strikes me as very sad that a place with such a rich musical history and tradition is now warned against by none other than musicians themselves. This is not to say that there are no successful Beale Street musicians, but simply that the collective experiences and sentiments concerning Beale Street amongst the music community are foreboding at least if not outright negative.

Many artists on Beale are trying to get out of it and move beyond, but the reality is that Beale is not equipped for upward musical mobility. Nevertheless, Beale Street has been and is still a consistent location of employment for artists and musicians. Furthermore, fans of blues and soul love Beale and love the tradition it represents. Sadly, it turns out that love for tradition can be restrictive and result in backwards thinking. As Tonya Dyson told me:

[People] are coming to Memphis they want this music. So they are dictating if you wanna play certain sets you gotta have a certain amount of covers. And it doesn't

⁷ Personal Interview with Catrina Guttery

allow for that freedom. And Memphis music in particular was born out of a spirit of freedom. And I think Memphis should loosen up the legacy and embrace the spirit that inspired the legacy.”⁸

The problems at issue that I’ve just addressed concerning Beale are not exclusively specific to that street but are also evident in and indicative of the Memphis music scene as whole and the cities’ attitude towards it. This is why an understanding of the Memphis music community must start with an understanding of what Beale used to symbolize comparatively to what it stands for now which is tax revenue via tourism at the expense of a thriving cultural hub and music economy.

As in every other aspect of life in society, racial division is present within the music community. When talking to Doug Easley, former co-owner of Easley-McCain records, about the Memphis music scene he referred to Memphis as having two sides: the white side and the black side. He made it very clear that the division between the crowds was stark, but that the dividing line was starting to fade as well. I asked him whether there is much communication between “sides” of the music industry. He revealed to me there is a divide but he thought that to a certain extent it ought to be that way. When directly asked about racial division he said, “There's a division for sure. Like when you go to hip hop. Mainly, to me, that's a black music. And it should be. It should be run by— It should be managed by—You know all those people. I think everybody in that scene if they can make it as strong as they can that's what they need.” Easley seemed very eager and certain that black people ought to call the shots when it comes to black artforms. However, when asked about not just across race but communication cross-genre he called the community “nichey” but “natural”. He claimed that people align themselves with the type of music they like and they generally like to stay in that niche. However, there is a difference between a scene being nichey and a scene being

⁸ Tonya Dyson

segregated to the point that side has little to know idea what the other is doing. Crockett Hall an upcoming local artist and employee at Sun Records comments:

To me, to see our community kind of have regressed back to that segregatedness, when it's not even being forced—It's just those institutionalized racism that's sometimes not even aggressive. It's casual. A lot of these white musicians I know don't even know where to go. I talk to people all the time and we'll talk about hip hop we love but we're not talking about Memphis hip hop our Memphis soul. If it's not something that's been on the radio nationally where people know, then they just don't know about it. It is a shame because that is the future of where music is going.⁹

In the same vain, Jeremy Shrader commented, “That's probably more social oriented because there's always been that sort of segregation with educational backgrounds of the community. So, guys that know each other play together.” This talk and suggestion about natural niches lead me to question the nature of the racial division in the music scene further. Did it just come down people being starkly divided by personal preference, or were there other elements that contribute to a more systemic division? Furthermore, even there truly was a “natural divide”, would it be right to be satisfied with that? When I informed John Paul Keith of the black woman who recently found out that her bandmates made more money when she was not around, he started recalling a similar experience with a local predominantly black band:

This is a local act with a lot of respect and prestige. They should have instantly been in the gig. There was this person that no longer books at this place but does still book music in Memphis—There was some question as to why that act wasn't being

⁹Personal Interview with Crockett Hall

booked. The email response was “We don't want that audience in here.” This was an older act. So, what do you mean “That audience?”. Older or black what is it?¹⁰

John Paul Keith insisted that times are definitely changing and that racial intolerance will be swiftly confronted by the Recording Academy but he also ceded that if these are the experiences that some people are having then the scene definitely does have racial issues that ought to be further addressed.

The racial divide in music is ultimately due to ongoing segregation which mainly manifests itself in the geographical breakdown of the city. To think about music entirely separately from the needs and problems of those who create it is to be largely ignorant of the message behind the music and therefore largely ignorant of the music itself. In order to understand the dynamics of the current music scene, one must also be aware of the greater realities of income inequality, poverty, and geographical housing segregation that still burden many Memphians. When thinking about music, bands and artists, consider that people are going to play with who they know and they know who they grew up with. If someone is fresh out of high school or college and wants to start a band and they need a brass section they are going to call up their high school friends who played the trumpet and trombone in high school band. This much makes sense and *prima facie* it does not seem innately damaging. However, when described by Victor Sawyer, a self-described freelance musician and a music education fellow with the Memphis Music Initiative, the phenomenon takes a much more systemic shape:

Also from an education standpoint. Our schools are pretty segregated. If you're thinking about the musicians coming up out of band classes. If you're at Booker T Washington or at Central High School almost everyone you play with is black. So,

¹⁰ John Paul Keith Interview

who you gonna call when you get out of high school or you're all studying at the University of Memphis? You're gonna call your black friends. You're gonna do that. Or maybe black people trained you. Of course, the only places you're gonna know are where your African-American play-uncle used to play the clubs. I don't know if it's super intentional but it's just the way the racial-politics in Memphis play out through economics and education.¹¹

The segregation in the schools leads to segregation in the arts community and both of these factors are only worsened upon considering Memphis' gross geographical segregation.

Most of the cities' inhabitants grew up in neighborhoods that were severely segregated which means if people wanted to start bands they were often going to ask people with the same skin color as them to join. As far as housing goes, the city is still heavily segregated. 103,000 households—41 percent of all in urban areas of Shelby County—live in neighborhoods that are 90% predominantly black *or* white. Even in communities that are seemingly more integrated it is because the neighborhood is mid transition from having predominantly white residents to predominantly black ones.¹² Furthermore Memphis has the 10th highest levels economic segregation (accounts for segregation of income, education, and occupation) for a large metropolitan area in the United States.

¹³ This is in great part due to mass white flight, which has only been incentivized due to the nature of city residents in Memphis having to pay both city and county tax. People with the economic means to move often find residence outside of the jurisdiction of the city to escape city taxes and as a result amass more wealth. The people with the means to leave the city are most often white people of the upper middle to upper classes. This phenomenon effectively drains the city of major revenue

¹¹ Personal Interview with Victor Sawyer

¹² <http://archive.commercialappeal.com/news/segregation-persists-in-memphis-area-neighborhoods-experts-say-but-solutions-are-elusive-ep-11794730-324362081.html>

¹³ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2015/02/americas-most-economically-segregated-cities/385709/>

sources that it otherwise relies upon to fund programs, schools, transportation, etc. The apparent consequence is an inner city full of predominantly poor, black Memphians with failing education systems and lacking city transportation systems while middle class and wealthy whites flourish in the suburban county. Another fact to consider is that poor people don't go to music shows. Victor Sawyer says:

It's a lot of poor people in Memphis that are not even trying to think about going to see a show. They can't do it. And they don't care cause they're poor and they have more important things to worry about than whether somebody's EP is doing well. They just don't care...There's a lot of poor people and they're spread out too. That sprawl didn't help us at all...Memphis is not condensed at all. That hurts.¹⁴

This is but a basic outline of the socio-economic landscape of racial division, yet this harsh reality provides the general mold for the shape of the music scene's racial dynamic.

The Memphis music scene and the city community at large suffers from sectionalism and general distrust due to decades of rough race relations. One Memphis artist put it like this "The music community isn't as connected as it could be but it's getting better. There is a race & segregation problem, and a lack of spaces for artists to connect." The city of Memphis covers 324 square miles of ground and has been described to me as "a city made up of about 20 small towns". The city does seem to be divided into multiple boroughs of sorts: Downtown, Midtown, University District, East Memphis, Frayser-North Memphis, Raleigh, South Memphis, and Orange Mound. with each having its share of neighborhoods. The sad fact is that the city sprawl has these distinct neighborhoods spread far apart and because of mass poverty and poor public transportation systems each section/district within the city has essentially become its own isolated small town or

¹⁴ Victor Sawyer Interview

community. Having multiple communities with distinct identities within a city is not a bad thing. In fact, I would consider it quite the opposite. The blending of cultures, styles, and genres has always been the engine behind musical innovation. This is especially true when considering Memphis music history and the birth of rock n roll as well as the musical histories of schools like Booker T. Washington and Manassas, which birthed great musicians from the jazz educator Jimmie Lunceford to Isaac Hayes. Nevertheless, when communities with distinct identities are deeply segregated, ridden with mass poverty, and restricted by lack of mobility they tend to culturally insulate themselves by isolating themselves from other scenes and parts of the city. In the words of Crockett Hall:

Civil Rights did not do as much as I was raised to believe it had. We still have a lot of the same problems. Now we have laws in place that make white people feel like those problems don't exist. I talk to people all the time that don't want to acknowledge what white privilege is. It's very frustrating.¹⁵

The negative stigma, stereotype, and lack of knowledge of varying areas across has built up intangible but serious socio-economic barriers. The result being folks in South Memphis generally not having the desire to go East Memphis, many people in Midtown generally having no desire to go Downtown, and folks in Collierville rarely ever going North Memphis so on and so forth. It is sad but very interesting to see how even though the racial divisions and tensions have lessened their very existence still translates into black music and culture.

Although sectionalism plays a part in the deficiency of the cities' overall connectivity the most important aspect to that may well be the access to quality transportation. How can communities ever be more tolerant and supportive of each other if they are not even mutually

¹⁵ Crockett Hall Interview

accessible? How can Memphis ever become more integrated if black communities and white communities rarely interact with each other? How can someone pay for a show at a Midtown venue if they can't even get there?:

...poverty is more than an income problem. It's also a housing and transportation problem which drains disposable income and gives families less to spend on improving their lives. In metro Memphis from 2000 to 2009, median income increased 12.7% but housing costs increased 25% and transportation climbed 40%. In other words, the obligatory purchase of a car and its operations is no different than a direct pay cut for tens of thousands of Memphians.¹⁶

These facts of lack of mobility and social stigma make it difficult to push the narrative of one unified Memphis music community. In fact, it made me question the very notion of a unified Memphis community. The Memphis music scene is splintered just like the city's greater community is.

Distinct music scenes are beneficial and add to the vibrancy of Memphis' artistic culture but the lack of communication and promotion cross genre hurts every scene. Artists who take their art as a legitimate profession understand that expanding their fanbase is an eternal goal and decent exposure, promotion, and support is all key to doing that. However, functioning and trying to increase one's fanbase and exposure in a musical niche/are where everyone is essentially performing and listening to the similar types of music as you can only go so far. A more connected and truly unified music community could ideally have the means to promote artists all over the city to all communities in the city. However, none of this can ever happen if people do not come together and

¹⁶ <http://www.smartcitymemphis.com/2014/02/attacking-the-serious-drag-on-the-memphis-economy/>

talk about how to make such connections, partnerships, and promotions happen. When asked if the music scene in Memphis was connected one musician at the event at High Cotton responded:

Musicians fraternize and support one another as a whole—different folks sit in and sub for gigs, but collaboration on a large scale is non-existent. Very little co-writing...Never gotten together much with folks just for the sake of the song. I want to see a Greenwich village type of Memphis scene. We need to feed off one another's creative drive more. I believe it will be the difference between infrequent blips on the radar and Memphis going nuclear.

Most every Memphian I've talked to agrees that there's just something about this place that just keeps pumping out natural talent. You will often hear folks say, "There's just something in the water" and whether or not that is true it is undeniable that Memphis has a deep music tradition that is honored observed and continued to this day. However, to upcoming and new artists it seems that the tradition is highly more honored and respected than they who live to carry the tradition on. An anonymous artist confided, "Memphis loves being referred to as a 'Music City', but it seems to be stuck in the past and relying on the names that built it up, but not supporting those that continue to." Aspiring "middle class musicians" find it hard to make connections in a city without established support networks. Memphis music and culture has run so deep for so long but it seems as if the cities artists have been trying to flourish with a stark disadvantage. The musical niches and cliques are developed and have a decent following however their success is limited due to the lack of support, communication, and collaboration with other musicians and artists. If musicians stood together, supported, and promoted each other's art the entire community could look a lot more unified, connected, and ultimately successful. To many, this means deeper investment into infrastructure is of the music scene.

Nashville and Memphis are the two biggest metropolitan cities in the state of Tennessee and a spirit of rivalry has been present in both cities. Even though this rivalry exists on some levels, in terms of musical infrastructure and music being a foundational aspect of the city, Nashville is the clear winner. It has big labels, it has big stars i.e. Taylor Swift. Significantly, it also has a lot of city support and a solid network of marketers and promoters. Music in Nashville is truly a business and the city respects and treats it as such because with its 10-billion-dollar impact on the city's economy and 3.2-billion-dollar support of labor income, music in Nashville is an enormous economy.¹⁷ Furthermore, Nashville truly supports and invests in the development of its music community. Nashville benefits from the city government funding the "Music City Music Council" which self-describes itself as, "...an association of business leaders charged with developing strategies toward heightening the awareness and development of Nashville's world-wide reputation as Music City."

Meanwhile in Memphis, on his first day in office the new mayor Jim Strickland dismantled the Memphis and Shelby County Music Commission, an organization conceptually similar to but realistically not as effective as the "Music City Music Council". The mayor claims that this was a necessary measure in order to redistribute funds for salary increases in order to "retain" other city government officials.¹⁸ Whether or not cutting the Music Commission was the right play, it definitely sent a message that was the polar opposite from the message Nashville is sending. When I asked Doug Easley about the Memphis-Nashville dichotomy in music he said:

As far as being a thriving economy like Nashville. No, we're no where near it.

There's no comparison. There's none. I mean you gotta go--We've sorta always had a rivalry and they've take the lead. There's no doubt. And whether it's real or whether

¹⁷ <https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/1914/Music-Industry-Provides-10-Billion-Impact-on-Nashvilles-Economy-Annually.aspx>

¹⁸ <http://archive.commercialappeal.com/entertainment/music/memphis-music-beat/mayor-elect-strickland-explains-decision-to-shutter-music-commission-27f83439-634c-4ec7-e053-0100007-363870291.html>

it's not. I mean over the past ten fifteen years Nashville's hipped Jack White's gone there. The Black Keys dudes go there. So they're sorta cracking that case because really Nashville "if you have money you can come play". You sorta have to go there and get next to the people who are pushing the careers and everything and that's what they're doing.¹⁹

However, there is a local opinion that Memphis is unique and different than Nashville for a reason. They claim that the near tangible uniqueness of the creative freedom surrounding this place is part of the draw of the city. Zac Ives describes as such:

There's history here and it's not been torn down and it's not been built over in strip malls. It's all still there. And part of that is to our detriment. But the silver-lining out of that is that these things still do exist on some level. And while it may be more of a ghost rather than some Dollywood. It feels more real that way too. If you really wanna tap into it I think you can. Does that mean you can be here in Memphis and succeed in some big industry way? I think that's a different question. But I know that this is a place where artists can succeed because there's tight-knit group of people that are willing to go out and work, cheap.²⁰

In addition, some feel that Nashville is almost too polished and industry oriented. They describe Nashville as having a much more corporate, marketing, and profit-motive driven music community. In this way, for some musicians looking for true genuine art Nashville can almost feel less authentic in its purpose and devotion to actual music. Jeremy Shrader uses Chili's restaurant as an illustration of this sentiment:

¹⁹ Doug Easley Interview

²⁰ Zac Ives Interview

Some people go on vacation and really want to eat at Chili's because they know it's gonna be the same menu everywhere they go. To me that's Nashville. Some people look for that funky hole-in-the-wall that might have a cockroach or two but their food is really good and maybe that's more Memphis. It's more authentic. More homey.²¹

In Memphis, music is not nearly as established as an economic market. For the city, music seems to be a means of attracting more tourists. Memphis music is still seen as more of a tradition than a potential market or economy even though the natural talent in the city is abundant. The Nashville press supports its music scene much more so than the Memphis press. Zac Ives comments:

Go look at the Nashville city paper. They've got ten pages of reviews of music of current bands and shows that are going on. You know Memphis. You have to go all the way through the newspaper and they'll be one thing written up and there's gonna be a calendar with three pictures and maybe one paragraph and it's two shows. And three pictures. For an entire week of shows in Memphis. You can get written up in that and have nobody at your show...The problem that Memphis has always had is that a lot it's disposable income is all out in Arlington and Collierville and Cordova. The University of Memphis is a commuter school and so there aren't a ton of people that are living right there and you don't have a radio station. You gotta jazz radio station. But they're not playing anything you would hear at clubs. It's not supporting the shows. Then you've got Weevil. Weevil's great. I've got awesome friends on there but they won't support shows. Every other volunteer radio station I've ever heard of

²¹ Jeremy Shrader Interview

will have somebody write-in and talk about the shows are all going on because it feels like that's a community oriented thing. But somehow in their world, if they talk about one they'd need to talk about all of them. So they won't let you talk about any of them. It's crazy. It's another head scratcher. We're full of these head-scratching things that don't seem to make any sense.²²

General acknowledgement and generating awareness of the musical acts and the music scene are also key issues. People don't hear about acts like they should, and when average music fans traditionally think of a "successful" music scene they would expect multiple in-your-face pop star successes. While that has and can happen in Memphis, as of late it has not been the case. Memphis artists describe the music culture as more down to earth and underground. In the words of John Paul Keith:

The Memphis scene is on the upswing but it might not always be in ways that people are used to seeing. A lot of people have wanted to help the Memphis music scene and they're not really in the business. So their metric by which they judge whether someone is successful is what they see on TV. So American Idol or major pop success. And that does happen. There's no one in the Memphis scene right now at that level. Although it could happen at any moment. There have been efforts-- organized efforts sometimes to try to help the Memphis music scene and that's what they're looking for and they don't see that and they think "Oh, there's no scene in Memphis". But what they don't understand is that it's much more underground.

While the music scene might currently have more of an underground feel to it, this alone is not viable attitude or strategy for the future of the music scene. At a certain point plans for the

²² Zac Ives Interview

sustainability of the blues tradition will have to be reevaluated because times are changing what once used to be is gradually fading and becoming forgotten. Tonya Dyson addressed some issues surrounding the sustainability of the Memphis music tradition:

What's your plan of sustainability? At some point people aren't gonna know who Elvis is. People aren't going to know who artists from Stax are. It may be Timberlakeland. You never know. That's the generation where Timberlake may be the relic. So you have to think about that. What are we doing to prepare ourselves for the future? If we don't show the children of this legacy and help them attain these levels--As a city how are you looking at sustainability and capitalizing off of the fact that this is an amazing breeding ground that has this legacy and has so many kids that have grown up playing and listening to this music that know have a song of their own just like they did.²³

She raises an excellent point.

The Memphis music tradition is amazing and it should be lauded but the legacy cannot continue unless the music continues as well. If the city of Memphis at large truly cares about its musical history and tradition, then the greater Memphis community should be invested in the continuity of such a rich cultural background. Jeremy Shrader put it like this:

I feel like it's not as much of a priority as it should be. Memphis is a music town. FedEx and St Jude are big names but Memphis music is certainly on par with those as far as what not only economically drives the city but brings people here. If we're going to continue doing that, they have to make music a priority...Plus Memphis

²³ Tonya Dyson Interview

needs to have strong musical community. Not only for ourselves but for the place that it serves in history and currently--Memphis is music. I would like to see that continue.²⁴

Nevertheless, some musicians are deeply skeptical of infrastructure. They feel like Memphis is Memphis because it has a constant spirit of individualism, freedom, and independence. To many musicians Memphis is a genuine music town because of the focus on how songs connect with audiences and make them feel. They don't want to see Memphis turn into a corporate owned media giant. They like that artists and musicians have a lot of say and control over their own art. Regardless of these concerns, people agree that if infrastructure is needed in any way it is needed to promote Memphis music across the city, nation, and world. Crockett Hall thinks, "I am not a big believer in organizations being the ones to fix that problem. If organizations are capable of doing anything it is maybe getting the word out and promoting." Catrina Guttery reflects on the work of past work of the now decommissioned Memphis Music Foundation:

Helping Memphis musicians get outside of Memphis is certainly important. We did that at the Music Foundation. We took musicians including Al Kapone, The BarKays, Lou Cero, many different genres. We took them many different places including SSW. Also the Blue Bird in Nashville. I think continuing to do that is important... Showing support for our artists and putting our money where our mouth is going to help a lot because you're getting Memphis music outside. But I mean bands tour all the time in the name of Memphis music. But having the city support is very important as well.²⁵

²⁴ Jeremy Shrader Interview

²⁵ Catrina Guttery Interview

Unfortunately, the city government almost has a nonchalant attitude towards the future of the cities' music. When city officials with experience in city planning were invited to Rhodes College to be panelists on a discussion of Memphis' infrastructure and future development, I asked about the city's plan to develop its music scene. The response was a collective look of bewilderment and a subsequently non-reassuring promise that they had "someone working on it".

It puzzled me why the city which lauds itself as a music city and "Home of the Blues and Birthplace of Rock N Roll" seemed nearly ambivalent to the prospect of investing in the development and promotion of the local music scene. When I spoke with her Catrina Guttery shed light on this concern:

We're spoiled in the regard that we have so much good music here that we think that musicians are just taking care of themselves and being resourceful and going elsewhere. I don't want to see that happen... I think the city government tends to think about what has happened and what's not happening. So, it's important to have young people involved with that because there the one's with their fingers on the pulse.²⁶

Other artists seem to be slightly more wary of the government's attitude and approach to music.

Crockett Hall comments:

They don't care. I do not see or hear of anyone connected to the city in any major way—being a part of any part of the creative community in any way other than for a photo opportunity. One of the very first things the new mayor did was to cut the funding to the Memphis Music Commission which was one of the things that was

²⁶ Catrina Guttery Interview

really making an effort as infrastructure to—They seemed to be doing it right. They seemed to be concerned about the art and not necessarily the marketability of that art.²⁷

The current general attitude of expecting good musicians and artists to consistently make it out of Memphis with minimal infrastructure, community support, and promotion harshly caps the growth of the local musical economy which in turn limits the overall economic growth of the city. John Paul Keith shed some light on the origin of the reluctance in support for music:

I think there's a generational aspect to infrastructure as well. I think there was a generation from the 60s and they saw the music business bottom out. They have a perspective that tends to be very negative. Some people will immediately shoot down any idea you have. "That's Memphis" "That's just Memphis." You hear it all the time. I reject that. I think that's generational. I think it's a new day. I think we have an entirely new generation of Memphis musicians. And they have different perspective.

If the music scene in Memphis thrives it will only bring more artists, musicians, singer-songwriters, and music fans along with it which means economic growth for the entire city. This is a source of optimism for some artists. Artist feedback at the High Cotton event also included this written response:

Memphis has so much amazing history and an amazing culture/music that other cities try to attain. There's a lot to be proud of and celebrate here. There is a lot of current living talent to invest and support. We should talk about/acknowledge the tension/division that exists, and try to use music as one way (of many) to bring

²⁷ Crockett Hall Interview

people together. I don't want to see Memphis try to become something it isn't—I want to see it celebrate the beautiful cultures that created this city as what it is.

For the music tradition to persist in Memphis the city must buy in to being a city of cultural value. Memphis needs to be a welcoming and supportive place for new artists. Musicians are real people and professionals. Professionals in any field have various needs and a city that has prided itself in its artistic contributions to the world must continue to promote and support its artists who are the literal continuations of the city's cultural legacy, just as it works to bring in jobs from other fields. Another musician wrote to me that, "Memphis loves being referred to as a 'Music City'. But it seems to be stuck in the past and relying on the names that built it up, but not supporting those that continue to."

In order for the Memphis scene to grow and continue the tradition of being a music city, the city as a collective entity must buy into the future of Memphis music without being restrained by traditionalist thinking and conceptions "Memphis music" or traditionally preferred appearances. A local artist commented "In some ways, Memphis Music is a niche. We can dominate globally if we leverage our heritage to create opportunities for emerging talents." The most notable way that this could happen is if the city of Memphis truly embraced its hip-hop culture and backed, promoted, and supported it as it does the music of Elvis, or the blues, or Stax. In addressing the city's attitude towards hip-hop Victor Sawyer compares Memphis to Atlanta:

One thing that Atlanta did really well: They were like "We recognize that trap music is a major thing that nobody else has" and they said we're not going to ignore it. We're going to capitalize on it. And they did that. Sometimes I think Memphis says "We don't like that" because we come from the music community and they don't necessarily uplift it like they could. Even though that rap music is coming from a place of realness.

Right in this area. The poorest zipcodes in the nation. So it's not like this is fake people just trying to rap. But the Memphis music community just chooses not to uplift it. How are you not going to support the new stuff that is right here. We keep talking about Stax, we keep talking about Elvis, we keep talking about the blues, everybody knows that that's great. But there's literally an entire subset of music that people are just like "No, we don't wanna support that"... People are starting to say "We can't be behind the times on this". There are still some people who turn their nose at it. They maybe don't want to have a rap concert in their club or their bars. So it is different in that regard. But it is changing.²⁸

This proposition of embracing new music in some ways does suggest change which is not an easy thing to do in a city filled with people who respect and honor traditions dearly. Nevertheless some of this respect can be misplaced. (Consider that Memphis is still debating over whether or not to take down a commemorative statue to Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Klu Klux Klan.) However, it is in no way a stretch to assert that blues and soul are no longer the nation's most beloved "hit genres" and even though Memphis may be home of the blues and soul its musical contributions and developments are not constrained to those two genres. Among younger demographics hip hop and R&B are the biggest styles of music out there. These styles are not just popular amongst millennials. For the first time in history Hip-Hop/R&B has overthrown rock music as the most played genre of music. According to the collective volume of album and track sales as well as the number of audio and video streams, Hip-Hop/R&B has a hold on 25.1 percent of the volume of music output, while rock tails behind at 23 percent of total volume.²⁹ This is important because not only does it signify that the nations cultural tastes and dynamics are changing but it also shows that these new genres are

²⁸ Victor Sawyer Interview

²⁹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hip-hop-now-tops-the-charts-nielsen/>

becoming increasingly popularized across the board. Even though Hip-Hop is often referred to as a newer genre of music, it's been around since the 80s. Thusly, the genre has made its impression on every generation from the Baby Boomers onwards and has cast a wide net as for as audiences go. This means that the existing and emerging middle class are generally hip-hop fans. Hip-hop is a hit genre for young people but also for middle-aged demographics who are establishing careers and accumulating wealth. From an economic and cultural standpoint, it would be a shame to watch the Hip-Hop/R&B era of music progress without strong representation from Memphis which is home to the roots of those particular genres. Memphis has Hip-Hop and R&B acts to offer and is currently home to a number of such acts, however those music scenes have not been given an equal or adequate amount of support and promotion from both the city and from venues. Another musician at the High Cotton event commented, "Our music scene needs to pay more attention to and support the hip-hop/R&B scenes, and there should be more crossover between that and more established genres."

Venues are key to the sustainment of Memphis music and getting them to sincerely buy into the entire array of Memphis music is necessary to the promotion, growth, and development of Memphis music. Some describe the Memphis scene as desperately lacking true venues. Many of what are locally called music venues aren't truly venues at all, but are bars and restaurants that have been made to loosely accommodate music acts. Furthermore, these restaurants and bars that do host music are service businesses first and true music venues second or so down the line. This means that while some people who come to these venues are looking for good music, the audience is not geared around listening to the music. This lack of true music venues that attract audiences that are primarily focused with hearing good music hurts the music community because it does not allow for adequate provision so that musicians can be given decent exposure to audiences who are particularly looking for high quality music. Furthermore, these pseudo-venues try to attract as much business as possible which often results in college football games being displayed behind the bands on stage. This is all

compounded with the reality that true venues often are not booked by local agents or people who now local acts and our acquainted with the scene. Zac Ives of Goner Records claims:

There are serious venue problems. There's no local booker. I don't think there's a local booking agent. Somebody may be able to correct me but Minglewood is booked by a outside agency. New Daisy is booked by an outside agency. The Hi-Tone is booked by Skinny but his background was newbies before this...People don't come through Memphis. In our world, it's harder to bring people through Memphis and part of that is because we don't have anybody actively pursuing bringing people in. From a city and infrastructure perspective we are losing massively by not having booking agents.

30

Furthermore, the non-top tier music venues that book pop-ug gigs are continually booking acts that they know and acts that fit into locally established genres with very little mix up or cross over. Another artist at the High Cotton event commented earnestly that Memphis venues suffer from, “Diversity, lack of opportunities—Why can’t we spread the love around and start including new artists in city-wide/community/corporate events.” Venues generally don’t branch out in their artist outreach because they want consistent quality and correspondingly consistent profits.

As a result, certain venues get known for having particular acts and while that creates a niche market for a given venue, the flip side of the coin are the profits lost from diversifying the line-ups. Because of traditions, habits, and the comfortability of consistently only having to book a few different acts, venues often miss the opportunity to develop, explore, and capitalize on the markets and different audience members that other genres are sure to attract. Crockett Hall theorizes:

³⁰ Zac Ives Interview

If we did a better job at being ok with booking bands and artists that don't necessarily fit together genre-wise you're going to get that cross-pollination naturally because the fan base that comes out to see X will probably still be there for Y. Then you've got that cross-pollination... As long as we are constantly booking like Goner bands with Goner bands or booking singer-songwriters with singer-songwriters and only doing those types of things, we're just going to stay divided... I just wanna see those walls get broken down... As a community we have to do a better job of making sure we're not only limiting ourselves to going out to see our friends in the scenes we're comfortable with.³¹

Venues may like having their own identity, but if they more often supported and promoted an array of genres more people would get plugged into the Memphis music scene because venues would be casting a wider net for their desired audience members. What generally venues care about is filling up their space and selling alcohol to patrons. There either needs to be more diversity in acts per venue or a substantial concentration of diverse venues that are close together. All in all, a heightened diversity in acts fosters a deeper audience which can help with artist exposure, venue profits, and connectivity across the Memphis community. A music scene in which genres work and perform in isolation provides the bases for analogy crafted by Crockett Hall:

In England, they would always have the royal family constantly stay within the bloodline or whatever. What you're doing is actually weakening your sons and daughters because that's not the way that we're supposed to be. It's the exact same

³¹ Crockett Hall Interview

thing music. If you are limiting yourself in that way, you're watering down and diluting it.³²

One of the more somber parts of all of this is that many musicians and artists are afraid to speak out and assert any form of critique on venues especially the ones that they perform at and for. This creates an oppressive sort of environment where the musicians in their opinion can be treated unfairly but have to endure whatever negative experiences they may have for fear of losing a gig. Another artist at High Cotton commented, “Our musicians are not being served by our venues—and it’s a buyers’ market. We talk privately but not publicly for fear of losing gigs. What are musicians’ next steps? Pros and Cons of Unions? Viable? Worthwhile? We can do better.” I agree we can do better but it is going to take a collective and unified effort on behalf of artists, venues, and audiences to truly support and buy in to continuing the tradition of homegrown Memphis music. Catrina Guttery shows her support by saying:

So in order for me to not be a part of the problem, that's why I go out. I think it starts by leading the charge. If I'm doing other people will buy into it. That's what I think. I'm a believer. We got too many haters out there. Too many people want it to not work out. I think it can.³³

The combination of Memphis’ music tradition and diverse local talent already make the Memphis scene a prime target for aspiring musicians. However, it’s true potential is in many ways is being reined in by conservative and traditionalist thinking that over glorifies the established genres of the region such as country, blues, and rock n’ roll. Even though it is important to respect that these genres and the hit records they produced are what gave Memphis its current notoriety and status as a

³² Crockett Hall Interview

³³ Catrina Guttery

music town, it is even more important for Memphis' music legacy for the city to continually embrace all kinds of music especially in newer genres. It is important to consider that it is new art that keeps the culture alive and the tradition going. At one point, rock n' roll was the new, edgy genre of music that it was really popular amongst younger demographics. Now, those younger kids have grown up and have grown up believing that their music is the only real or authentic Memphis music.

While their music may have given Memphis an international identity in the past, music has been around before Memphis became known for it and will persist long after figures like Elvis are considered ancient myths. Times are changing and so is the music. As long as the music produced from this area still comes from a place that focuses on making people feel, then it's still Memphis music whether or not it has the label or blues, soul or the like. Memphis as a collective community needs to realize this. It's the continual output of relevant music that truly gives a music scene it's notoriety and status not just past records, albums, and artists from yesteryear. New relevant music is happening now, but it is happening in pockets where people are absorbed in their own communities without being aware of other talent artists who exist and function in other niches. This in part is due to historical racial division that has manifested in segregated housing policy and racially divided education systems via white flight and gentrification. The result is a sprawled city that is boldly outlined by class and racial division.

This provides the framework for the existing music scene. While varying audiences have differing tastes and preferences in music, this geographical separation between white and black populations directly translates to the reality that various genres/scenes in Memphis are segregated. Black artists were brought up around other black artists and the same is true for white artists. Sadly, this also translates into how musicians are booked and compensated by various venues around the city. Furthermore, much of the Memphis population does not have reliable transportation or money

to even go see a music show. These are problems that until seriously addressed will continue to impact the music scene. Nevertheless, playing the blame game for why the Memphis music scene as a whole is cliquey and divided as it seems is not entirely useful beyond drawing attention to the fact that breaking down these barriers is in everyone's best interest.

From the top down Memphis has to fully buy in and support all Memphis music as well as basic belief that Memphis is a music city. At the top, while the city government cut the Memphis Music Commission because it was "unsustainable" it can still greatly support musicians in ways that don't require an official organization with a city-funded budget. From a merely economic aspect promoting aspect, the city can start seriously marketing itself as a music city to attract more artists, musicians, and young persons with disposable income who are looking for a relatively cheap place to come and start careers. The city should invest in lauding itself as a musical hub. If Nashville can believe in its music scene enough to make it a main export, Memphis can definitely hold its own as a music hub. It has to give itself chance again. Memphis owes itself that. But to do that, the city has to start promoting all music genres and not just the historically recognized ones. If Memphis is truly a music city, it should present the world the fullest extent of its musicality and music styles. Sadly, that is not currently the case. New genres and artists must be supported and accepted for their art. They are the future of Memphis' legacy. If we care about the cities' cultural legacy we have to continue to promote current music. This means embracing rap/hip-hop as a completely legitimate genre. Hip-Hop/R&B are the genres that will be remembered in the future in the light that blues and rock n' roll currently are. Memphis has to jump on before the train gets too far ahead of it. This is also dependent on venues being more comfortable with and booking a greater cross-section of diverse acts by genre and race as well. Doing so will increase audience size and exposure to new and upcoming artists from across all genres, this will add to increased profits for both venues and performers, and also contribute to a

greater sense of a connected Memphis music community. This is all would directly add to a greater sense of connectivity of the entirety of the greater Memphis area.