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CO-WRITING NASHVILLE STYLE:  
A RECITAL OF SELECTED COUNTRY SONGWRITERS

BY  
JOSEPH HENRY WANDASS, IV

A RECITAL PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Music in Commercial Music  
in the School of Music  
of the College of Music and Performing Arts  
Belmont University

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

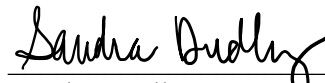
December 2022

Submitted by Joseph Henry Wandass, IV in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Commercial in Vocal Performance.

Accepted on behalf of the Graduate Faculty of the School of Music by the Mentoring Committee:

December 1, 2022

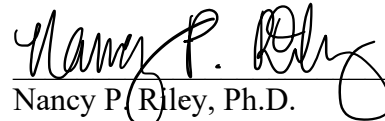
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## Introduction

Country music and songwriting have been hallmark features of the Nashville music scene for well over a century. From the fiddle tunes of the 1700s to early country songwriters of Kris Christopherson, Tom T Hall, Johnny Cash, and Jimmie Rodgers (among many others) and the modern songwriters walking in their footsteps, country songwriting sparked a musical revolution that would breed some of the greatest entertainers and musicians of all time. Co-writing, which is the act of two or more composers writing commercial music, developed in Nashville as a simultaneous reaction to various demographic, systematic, and structural changes that have occurred in the city over the past one hundred years. For this reason, co-writing and the experience of doing so have become intimately associated with Nashville, Tennessee, chiefly due to migratory patterns, the establishment of performance venues and shows, and changes in creation and distribution processes that brought prominence to this genre. These phenomena pushed the importance of collaboration between musicians, making Nashville a central pillar in the music industry. According to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, “To the world, Nashville is synonymous with music and songwriting” (NSHOF 2022).

Society’s early concept of the “Nashville dream,” the idea that one could “make it” in the music industry by spending many years songwriting and networking in the city, grew as tourism in the mid twentieth century grew. The “Nashville dream” refers to the storybook notion that if you put in the time and work, you can “make it” in music. This dream first developed as radio stations such as WSM played new country compositions by local and regional artists became very popular and further cemented this dream into

the American household. There is a common saying among writers known as the “ten year town” that describes the dedication required to survive in an industry with such a high barrier to entry. In addition, the establishment of the Grand Ole Opry, the Ryman Auditorium, and numerous music venues in Nashville’s lower Broadway area significantly shifted the ways in which music is made and disseminated, expanding country music’s appeal (Havighurst 2013). The Ryman quickly became the musical mecca for folk, country, and gospel music (WSM 2015). From the Ryman came an explosion of new venues which expanded quickly to include Tootsies World Famous Orchid Lounge, Rippy’s Bar and Grille, Honkey Tonk Central, Legends Corner, and numerous others. All thrived with unbridled tourism since their inception.

Recently, there have been many new music venues introduced into the fold of the Nashville music scene, most notably in the West End area. These venues include The Commodore, The Local, Tin Roof, and The Bluebird, all of which rose to great prominence after the influence of the television program *Nashville* (Washington Post 2017). Songwriters have been popularized through such shows as *Nashville* and even in State Farm television commercials for over a decade which depict the “aspiring singer songwriter” chasing the “Nashville dream” (State Farm Insurance 2021). According to well known Nashville country songwriter Scott Barrier, this is not always good for young singers who come here expecting instant gratification:

Though the show portrayed the seedier side of the music industry, it also gave the false impression that if an artist or writer would come to Nashville, it wouldn’t be too difficult to become successful. So, the Nashville community has been overwhelmed by thousands and thousands of artists and writers who come here “to make it.” (Barrier 2022)

Recent population growth in the Nashville region has changed the methods by which songwriters write, perform, and disseminate music, which has had a profound effect on the music scene itself. Population growth is a driving factor in that individuals from other states bring their production, songwriting, and vocal stylings to Nashville. Nashville is a melting pot for country music and music creation. Track writing and production writing have influenced songwriters in Nashville since the inception of the Digital Audio Workstation. A technique adopted by Nashville producers from Los Angeles transplants, “track writing” is the act of writing a song while a producer-writer is writing in a Digital Audio Workstation, rather than performing the song on an acoustic instrument and recording it later. This style of writing has become incredibly popular over the last five years, chiefly due to the style of Los Angeles-based pop music being so heavily influenced by this style of writing. According to legendary hit songwriter Jan Buckingham, “Back in the day, we all wrote around a table and then went into a studio to cut a demo, and then pitched the demo. Now more and more people write to tracks, and now, with the internet... and all the other new platforms available, there are many new ways to get your songs out there to be heard” (Buckingham 2022) Buckingham reflects here on the changes in co-writing, and how these changes allow for significantly faster dissemination, distribution, and creation of music.

In addition, demographic shifts resulting from the Californian migration (as a result of lucrative tax decreases when compared to cities such as Los Angeles) to the Nashville area have increased the prevalence of this new style of songwriting.

According to WKRN news, there has been a massive housing crisis causing mass migration of Californians to states with lower taxes (WKRN 2022). Even in 1995, W.H. Fray, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution for Demography in America, did a study on this mass migration to Tennessee calling it a “flight” of people from California to the deep South of the United States (Frey 1995). This pattern of migration has only increased over time. Thus, songwriters who once lived in Los Angeles are now moving to Nashville in search of security from the housing market bubble, particularly on the west coast, and bring their beliefs and styles of co-writing with them. This major change, in my experience, is the single largest shift songwriters have faced in the past ten years.

From 2020 to 2022, Nashville underwent other major shifts that have not been seen in recent memory due to the COVID-19 pandemic (McLeese 2021). Spotify and Tiktok began to buy up most of the stock in the music business, and now have a perceived two-sided monopoly over the industry (Khosravian 2022). This has put many Nashville labels out of business, and startups are almost impossible to create due to immense competition. These changes in the industry have also directly led to shifts in writing processes such as writing to tracks in a Digital Audio Workstation, publishers writing directly with artists, and the melding of stylistic genres from the west and east sides of the United States. Singers now must write their own music and market themselves to create any sort of sustainable income since there is such a high supply of singers in the industry.

Aoife Coffey in his 2016 dissertation at the University of Dublin in Ireland reflects on this lack of profitability: “Many artists do not receive large profits from music streaming because they do not own their songs. If the artists did not write the song, they



receive less money as the songwriters and the record company need[s] to receive their share before the artist does” (Coffey 2016). This means that singers need to understand the co-writing process more than ever, or they will not be able to survive as an artist in the modern music industry. These same trends have also led to a significant decrease in wealth distribution across music due to the speed at which producers can now create music. I have seen this in my own experience; for example, my royalty statements from BMI in 2022 are one thousand percent less than what they were in 2020, even though I have produced 46 professional tracks released into the market since 2020 and only put 3 songs into the market before January of 2020.

In this paper, I will analyze a selection of music I have co-written for the accompanying recital with a broad spectrum of ten active Nashville songwriters; each writer I will be discussing came to Nashville to follow the “Nashville Dream.” I will examine their distinctive vocal stylings, tones, and the impact of their writing style on vocal choices. Via email interviews with each songwriter, as well as my first-hand knowledge, I will paint a cross-section of the Nashville songwriting scene in 2022 from an ethnomusicological perspective. I chose to omit the highest paid or most well-known songwriters and personalities in Nashville. Instead, I am focusing on those who are relatively unknown outside of Nashville and with whom I have personally worked or written with during my tenure at Belmont. This has been my plan to complete my Master’s degree, but also to ascertain what the true nature of the “Nashville dream” is, where it came from, and its connections to collaboration and co-writing.

## **Part 1**

### **An Abridged History of Country Songwriting in Nashville**

The extant history of songwriting in Nashville is quite rich and is beyond the scope of what this paper will discuss. Rather, I will provide a brief overview of the relevant historical trends and history as related to this recital paper as to only show what is salient to our topic of country co-writing. This section will chiefly focus on the demographic, migratory, and venue-based connections between songwriters. In my interviews and research, the preponderance of evidence suggests that venues and migrations of songwriters are the two chief proponents of how co-writing developed in Nashville.

The earliest settlers of Nashville “celebrated in the late 1700s with fiddle tunes and buck dancing after safely disembarking on the shores of the Cumberland River” (Nashville Music City 2020). This early music would consist of a lute player and a fiddle player, oftentimes including a washboard or spoons to add rhythm. Nikos Alexander Pappas in his dissertation on Southern American sacred music confirms this thesis on Southern music migration patterns; “Musical culture in its migration away from the eastern seaboard also parallels the greater western and southern expansion of the United States from its initial configuration of localized regional subgroups to the beginnings of a larger national identity” (Pappas 2013). These compositions are known to connect to themes such as rivers, bodies of water, nature, and migration themes adopted from African American slaves (Pappas 2013). Part of this “identity” that Pappas speaks of is a larger national cultural shift that eventually gave rise to Country music through the co-writing and co-creation process.

According to Memphis's Stax Records and Museum, the melding of three key styles—black gospel, Appalachian, and minstrelsy—led to the development of country songwriting in Nashville; a beautiful and hopeful example of white and black music mixing together in the Mississippi River Delta (2020). These early Nashville musicians developed styles adapted from Appalachia and mixed with traveling minstrel troops who would travel between the South to the North during the Antebellum period of Reconstruction following the Civil War (White 2004). In addition, Southern gospel, a staple of black and white American musicians, would influence many of the earliest songwriters who wrote in parlor and minstrel styles, including Stephen Foster and other famous songwriters during the late 1800s. All of these factors lead to the development of a musical melting pot that would form what is known today as the country songwriting scene. Jimmie Rodgers perhaps exemplifies this best in his vocal stylings incorporating black gospel into an Appalachian bluegrass presentation. Many widely consider him to be the father of country music, and Johnny Cash personally viewed Rodgers as an inspirational figure. However, these iconic musicians would not have had the success they found without the performance venues that assisted their rise to stardom.

The Ryman Auditorium was one of the first major musical establishments in Nashville. Built in 1892 out of the remains of an old church, the Ryman was erected to be a haven for country and Gospel music. Ever since 1920, according to Henderson, “the Ryman has continued to serve Nashville in legitimate theater, concerts, and recitals, and, since 1941, has become especially famous as the home of the folk-music program, The Grand Ole Opry” (Henderson 1962). Within a mere thirty years, news of the Ryman's incredible acoustics and its enthralling and exhilarating concerts took the country by

storm and the Ryman soon was hailed as “the Carnegie of the South” (Ryman 2022). The Ryman clearly became associated with wealth and class, while lower Broadway, the road behind the venue, had become associated with the outlaws, outcasts, and the lower class. The Ryman quickly became the premier musical venue in Nashville until the Schermerhorn Symphony Center was built in 2003.

On Broadway in Nashville, Tootsies World Famous Orchid Lounge became “the home away from home for the likes of Chris Kristofferson, Faron Young, Willie Nelson, Tom T. Hall, Roger Miller and various Grand Ole Opry Stars” (Morris 2010). Frequently after shows at the Ryman, major artists would go to Tootsies to decompress, grab alcoholic drinks, and relax away from performances. This created what I, for the purposes of this paper, will call the “First Broadway boom,” when investors began to build similar musical establishments to compete with Tootsies such as Rippy’s Bar and Grille, Legends Corner Cafe, Honkey Tonk Central, Robert’s Western World, and Earnest Tubb Record shop, among many others (Castillo 2022). The “First Broadway Boom” of the 1950s directly increased tourism, and still serves as one of Tennessee’s largest revenue streams today in 2022.

However, it was not until October 5, 1925, when the WSM radio station “would birth its most famous show . . . the Grand Ole Opry,” that Nashville would become inseparably associated with country music (WSM 2015). WSM is the longest running radio station in the country and has been operating without pause since 1925. An acronym for “We Shield Millions,” WSM became the gatekeeper for country music, and Getting one’s music played on the radio station became a rite of passage for any Country artist who wished to achieve the “Nashville dream” (The Grand Ole Opry, 2022). The

Opry was the first of WSM's shows to "develop such an excited audience that fans would visit live studio broadcasts" (WSM 2015).

The music scene remained this way until the 1960s during the height of the Nashville Sound when thousands flocked to Nashville in search of elusive musical success. Nashville was then recognized a musical mecca that "has always been a magnet for dreamers, iconoclasts, poets, pickers . . . from all over" (Chapman 2010, iii). Tom T. Hall, who won the NSAI Songwriter of the Year in 1972 exemplifies this experience (Martin 1975, 357). This was the first inception of the "Nashville dream," and to exemplify its nature, one can find no better story than that of Tom T. Hall.

In 1964, "Tom T. [Hall] lived on a fifty dollar a week draw against future royalties and wrote songs four or five hours a day" (Martin 1975, 362). I highlight Hall as a poster child of the "Nashville dream," as he worked for many years, making barely enough money to get by, until he was successful. Hall began his musical career while working as a DJ in Virginia, where he impressed Nashville publisher Jimmy Key with his songs (Country Music Hall of Fame 2022). Key placed Hall's "D. J. for a Day" with Grand Ole Opry star Jimmy C. Newman, who had a Top Ten country hit with it in 1963—64 (Country Music Hall of Fame 2022). Hall moved to Nashville soon after in 1964 to pursue the "Nashville Dream" (Brown 2014). Hall faced many difficulties and trials while "working on starvation wages [before] Hall found his first large commercial success with Dave Dudley" (Country Music Hall of Fame 2022). This combination of talent, discipline, and work ethic made Hall a legendary songwriter that is well known even among the songwriting community today. Because of this, Hall found himself inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1978 (Brown 2014).

Over the past century, Nashville has seen a few large migrations of songwriters in and out of the town. However, since the 1960s, there has been a consistent steady flow of writers since the “Tom T. Hall stories” began to spread across the country. In 1967 there were approximately 80 songwriters in Nashville (NSAI 2022). That number rose to four thousand by 1997 (Reuter 2020). According to Bart Herbison, executive director of NSAI, “In the mid-’90s, we had approximately 4,000 working songwriters in Nashville making their primary living by writing songs” (Reuter 2020).

As of 2020, there are an estimated 1000 working songwriters pursuing this career in Nashville (Reuter 2020). However, these numbers, from only just two years ago have possibly been made inaccurate as West Coast migration to Nashville continues to increase the number of writers living in the city. It is not possible to accurately estimate the true number of songwriters in Nashville at this time due to the continuation of mass migration trends into Nashville during the COVID-19 pandemic. (WKRN 2022) By now, the number of songwriters is most likely significantly higher than the 1,000 individuals in 2020, increasing competition and decreasing wages dramatically for native Nashville songwriters.

Gentrification and changes to lower Broadway also shaped the songwriting community over the past many decades. New venues such as The Bluebird Cafe, The Listening Room, 3rd and Lindsley, The Local, The Commodore, and many others now serve as the new hot spots for local Nashville writers, while Broadway has become what most songwriters view as a tourist trap. As country songwriting legend Jan Buckingham states in our second interview, “Downtown, they want you to play covers, and I love to play the songs that I’ve written, both the ones that have been cut, and the

ones that have not. At the venues where I play, all the songwriters must play only songs that they have written. Downtown, you mostly have to play radio hits” (Buckingham 2022). No longer will these major acts or big songwriters go down to Broadway on a weekly or even monthly basis, due to being unable to perform original music.

This is what I call for the purposes of this paper the “Second Broadway Boom.” The boom is a controversial trend that is currently happening now in 2022. Investors, due to low taxes and low overhead costs, find easy returns on investment in Nashville as compared to other places around the United States, sparking the mass construction of new buildings and venues, similar to the histories of the original music venues of Nashville (WKRN 2022). The “Second Broadway Boom” began after the national television show *Nashville* presented the city as full of opportunity and promise and portrayed it as a “promised land” for those who came in search of fame in fortune. Los Angeles transplant, actor, and seeker of the “Nashville dream” Paul Ivy states, “I can see the lure this town has on so many young writers. I think the mistake I see most often is the thinking that with 3 chords I can get famous. It's simple, easy and I don't have to know that much music education or training” (Ivy 2022).

This is very controversial with the old-guard writers of the city, whose favorite performance venues are being rebuilt in the name of progress and corporate agendas. Many of the greatest writers still alive choose not to perform on Broadway. This is because on Broadway they cannot play their own songs, but rather must fit into the Nashville tourist cannon. Advocacy groups such as NSAI have done nothing about this, and as a result many legendary writers such as Jan Buckingham have chosen to abandon the places she used to play at which she may have played, rather than be affiliated with

these organizations which do not let her express herself in the ways she wishes. Where these organizations will go in the future remains to be seen.



## Part 2

### The Writers of The Recital: A History and Analysis

The recital that accompanies this paper featured the music of ten songwriters who are considered active in the Nashville music scene. Although they come from different backgrounds, each of these writers exemplifies the Tom T. Hall story of the “Nashville dream” discussed in Part 1. The recital incorporated stylistic and performance elements from each writers’ influences, and showcases a song co-written with each writer.

In this section, I will provide an abbreviated biography for each writer, their prominent songs, and an analysis of their writing styles, techniques, and methods that have an impact upon vocal performance. Due to my personal relationship with each writer, I elected to use email interview format to streamline communication and make interviews as simple as possible for these legendary figures. This is also to remove any possible conflict of interest created in-person by any personal ties I may have to a given writer.

#### Jon Gray

Jon Gray is a Grammy-nominated songwriter from Tullahoma, Tennessee who worked closely with country legend Ray Price. Gray is an owner of Peahead Productions, which is a multimedia production company the “has provided live and recorded TV programming to a six county area in lower Middle Tennessee for twenty-eight years on Channel 6 The Link TV Network” (Gray 2022). With cuts all around the world, Jon found his biggest success as “co-writer and co-publisher of “Beauty Lies in the Eyes of the Beholder,” which is the title track of Ray Price’s last album, *Beauty Is . . . The Final*

Sessions (Gray 2022). have performed a song entitled “Over the Telephone” that I adapted from lyrics Jon had written in the 1980s. I premiered this song on WSM National Radio on September 2, 2018 at the Texas Troubadour Theatre’s Midnight Jamboree with Zack Janson as a tribute to the tragic death of Mike Kennedy, the drummer of George Strait. Though Gray wrote the story about his wife and their journey through life together, the timeless love story exhibits a craftsmanship in lyricism that is uncommon by today’s musical standards: “And the high lines would burn between my house and yours/ our romance would continue behind closed bedroom doors/ where love’s tender words kept us talking on and on/ and then I’d get my goodnight kiss over the telephone.”

One of the key features of Gray’s writing is that his lyrics are incredibly relatable and speechlike, creating a story that can be related to by everyone regardless of background. This story captures the essence of country songwriting in a profound way, as the lyrics flow seamlessly into one another. The timelessness of the story plays to the advantage of the singer. When a singer has a lyric that is not universal, it divides the audience, making performance techniques and audience engagement more difficult. By using lyricism that drives the song, the song develops a freedom that allows the artist to sell it more easily. Similarly, a well-crafted jazz standard does not need the vocalist to change any aspect of the song in order to perform the song effectively.

Each of these artists chooses songs that allow them to stand onstage unabashed and perform as their most authentic selves. In George Strait’s performance style, the power of his writing and lyricism drive the performance, and I notice in my studies of the legend that Strait does not have to move off mic for the entirety of a performance. This is

clearly the intention Gray had for “Over the Telephone,” a classic that garners attention for the beautiful story it creates.

### Scott Barrier

Scott Barrier is a Nashville-based songwriter who now primarily works as a TV/film writer although he has found significant success in Country music through co-writing. As a jack-of-all-trades, “Scott has played in many bands of different genres, including rock, pop, folk, and country, which have all influenced his writing” (Price 2018). In his personal Alignable biography, Scott describes his move to Nashville and his successes thereafter: “Since moving to Nashville, I [Barrier] have had to opportunity to play with and for some great artists, including Gretchen Wilson, James Otto, and others” (Barrier 2022). Barrier has placements in TV advertisements as well as with local and independent artists, most recently with his song “It’s A Maryland Thing, You Wouldn’t Understand” which by calling back to his “Maryland roots, playfully name checks all the things that we all love about the Free State” (Demko 2022). This song is currently being used as a fight song for University of Maryland and was cut by singer Jimmy Charles.

The song “Burn Away,” written specifically for this recital, exemplifies Barrier’s use of prosody. Prosody is the melodic and rhythmic flow of a melody as measured against the lyrical content of a song. Barrier’s philosophy on this is that a melodic line should follow the textual makeup of the lyric, which parallels the philosophies of many writers in Nashville. However, rather than being akin to the text-painting styles of the Renaissance and early English madrigals, the singer using prosody actively thinks about this as they sing the song, not just while composing. Thus, there is an improvised nature to the melodies Barrier sings as he tailors the melody to match the mood and feeling he is

trying to elicit. This allows the singer vocal freedom to use prosody to create improvised melodies on various intervallic shelves above or below the main melody.

This is exhibited in “Burn Away” particularly in the chorus when Barrier masterfully crafted “Goes up in smoke, comes down in ash, some things were never meant to last.” Here, the word “up” is sung in an ascending line, while “down in ash” is sung descending, with the discretion of the singer as to what exact notes to hit. The prosody of this line creates a tension and release that leads to a strong conclusion that a complete vocal motion has occurred. This creates a sense of wholeness in the line, that strengthens the emotive ability of the vocalist.

#### Paul Ivy

Paul Ivy is an actor and songwriter who is an active performer in the Nashville songwriting scene. Early in his music career, “Paul moved to Upstate New York during his college years and became a member of the Woodstock music scene, playing in local bars and honkytonks across the area. While travelling up and down the east coast through the Appalachian Mountains, Paul found a new love for gospel bluegrass music” (Ivy 2022). This love of Gospel and Bluegrass lead Ivy to Nashville, where he now writes for Kobalt Records. According to Aaron Schilb, owner of successful tourist show Nashville Tour Stop, “From touring across the country, acting with David Bowie, and earning himself a gold record...this dude [Ivy] is cool as hell” (Schilb 2022). Clearly, Ivy is making a name for himself in Nashville.

“Hallmark Girl” is a song co-written by Ivy and I in the distinct pop-country style that is most popular on the radio today. The song mixes country lyricism and pop vocal

production to create the modern Nashville sound. Though the song was not track written, it exhibits elements of track writing as the style has pervaded most musical artists in the Country genre. The acoustic guitar part mimics a looped acoustic guitar track that would be found in a track writing room, giving the sense of a modern country sound yet the song was written from the old school “sitting around the kitchen table” method. The ostinato chord progression of I – V – vi – V, recognized as the most popular progression in modern music, parallels the feeling of a Hallmark movie by creating a sense of familiarity. Hallmark movies use familiar events and scenes to connect with their audience; similarly in this song, Ivy and I used a basic progression with a highly syncopated melody to create the modern country sound while also textually and musically painting the feeling of being in a Hallmark movie.

#### Nicole Miller

Nicole Miller is an up-and-coming singer-songwriter from Des Moines, Iowa. After starting out writing from her parents’ basement at a young age, she became an important voice in the current Nashville music scene. “She wrote her first song when she was twelve, already knowing in her heart and soul that music would be her life’s passion” (Miller 2022). She released her highly anticipated album “Lonely on the Weekend” with co-producer Christian Hale in 2021, becoming a part of the ASCAP GPS Project Class of 2021 (ASCAP 2021). She first started performing through hometown musical theatre but “continues in her vocal pursuits in Nashville, TN. Through songs and vocal delivery, Nicole Miller carries listeners on an emotional journey with musical laser precision” (Mill Creek 2022).

I will perform an intimate version of our co-written duet entitled “Already Over,” which encapsulates a simple, effective, and direct vocal delivery. One of the lines that expresses this direct style is in the second verse, which says “Could we go back to Indiana in the fall / We stayed up all night back when all we did was talk.” This honest, direct, and speechlike lyric delivers a sense of authenticity and honesty that is hard to find in a young writer. The double entendre at the end of the line is reminiscent of Buckingham’s style of double meanings, exhibiting how the Nashville songwriting community shares common values on what makes a song “good.” The picking feel on the electric guitar ostinato brings out the beauty of the simplistic piano lines, exemplifying the overall beauty and mood of the tune.

#### Norm McDonald

Norm McDonald is a former rockstar rose to prominence in the mid 1980s performing as the lead singer and writer for the 1970s rock band Truc of America (McDonald 2021). First starting his performance career working with various bands in his hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, “[He] Norm found his ticket to fame in ‘Truc of America,’ who became one of Milwaukee’s most successful and long-lasting bands” (Sonicbids 2022). Truc quickly found success on MTV, as well as opening for major artists such as Jerry Lee Lewis. “TRUC’s first big concert was on the main stage at Summerfest in 1972 with Jerry Lee Lewis, Gary US Bonds, The Dovells and The Chrystals” (Truc of America 2022). He is most known for his viral MTV performances, his uplifting warm style, and an abundant sense of humor.

McDonald’s MTV and Saturday Night Live performances exhibit a great deal of energy and charisma, with a sense of style that could only be described through masterful

songwriting technique. Comedic writing is intricate and requires patience and wit. He has now taken that unique witty style and become a mentor writer for many younger Nashville artists, while performing frequently at various songwriting rounds around the local Nashville songwriting scene.

I will be performing the song, “The Things I Didn’t Know,” which encapsulates McDonald’s attention to detail in writing as well as his conception of how story songs should be constructed. McDonald models the bridge of this song around the traditional country “turnaround” in which a singer comes to a great realization or life moment. In this song, the singer reflects chronologically on his upbringing, using imagery to depict a specific story or feeling. In the bridge, the singer then looks to the future to then explain what he has learned and will pass on. This perspective on life is only explained by masterful writing and a clear understanding of deep country lyricism that allowed vocalists such as George Strait to simply stand with a guitar and sing.

#### Nancy Deckant

Nancy Deckant is a music publisher and songwriter from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who works in both the creative and business sides of the industry. Deckant founded the independent publishing company NashvilleCool known for signing Hall of Fame writer Rory Bourke and ascertaining placements with Charles Easton of the television show *Nashville* (Deckant 2022). She also founded the company Discover Sooner, a new social media platform that connects songwriters and publishers to foster better business relationships. Known as a great networker and connector in the music industry, “Nancy Deckant is a top 40 Billboard songwriter . . . that connects unsigned songwriters with publishers and music professionals” (Deckant 2022). Nancy recently

wrote a top 40 local hit for spitfire country artist Dallas Remington, whose song “Uncommon Man” broke the top 25 on the Music Row charts. (Parry 2021)

I co-wrote “Two Front Seats” with Nancy to which she contributed direct stylistic and melodic content via a publishing perspective. I released this song in 2019 as my debut digital release. While writing this song, Deckant and I utilized track writing, which is the process of writing to a prerecorded track. Eric Mallon, a track writer in Nashville, recorded the guitar part, which was then looped, and instruments were added on top. This allows the other two writers in the three person room more freedom, as they do not have to function as composers, nor play the song while focusing on the lyrics and melody. This technique is now the most common form of co-writing, and with the catchy, repetitive nature of this melody and its call and response bridge, the vocalist benefits from the hypnotic positive energy that this form of writing brings.

“Better” is a song written with Eric Mallon and Nancy Deckant in 2019. The song exhibits the benefits of co-writing to a digital audio workstation. Mallon, a track writer with Deckant, exhibits new technological developments and shifts in the country music genre previously talked about in Part 1, particularly the shift to track writing. Track writing features the combination of pop vocal stylings with acoustic productions based on the looping of an ostinato acoustic, electric, or keyboard/synthesizer part. The acoustic guitar ostinato throughout “Better” that loops in a repeated pattern creates a juxtaposition against the syncopated repeated melodic motive in the vocal line, exhibited in the chorus on “Be, be better.”



## Jan Buckingham

Jan Buckingham is one of the most renowned songwriters currently working in the Nashville songwriting scene. With multi-genre gold and platinum “songs cut by Whitney Houston, Melissa Manchester, Clay Aiken, George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Pam Tillis, Brian White, Crystal Gayle, Gary Morris, Barbara Mandrell, Dottie West, to name a few” (International Songwriters Guild 2014) Buckingham has twice been nominated for Grammy awards, and has written for the television show *Hollywood Wives* and the film *My Cousin Vinnie*, and owns 14 active publishing companies, administering copyrights worldwide (NAMM 2022).

Buckingham is known for her use of “incorporating clever wordplay, such as double entendre ... a mainstay of country song lyrics” (Blume 2016). This play-on-words helps keep the audience engaged. This no doubt helped Buckingham secure cuts with artists such as Lee Greenwood, George Jones, and Pam Tillis, all of whom had artist images that did not call for extravagant performance techniques.

I will be performing the second song we co-wrote together entitled “Thinking ‘Bout You.” This song shows Buckingham’s ability to write for the artist exhibiting her use of clever wordplay. The opening line of the chorus, “I can feel you thinking about me” is turned around at the end of the chorus, “Cus I’m thinking ‘bout you,” speaking about the phenomenon of when two people think of one another in two separate places. This is meant to both convey the evident tension through sexual innuendo while also creating a sense of longing for a lover that is mutual from both sides of the story. This use of wordplay is found from the first line, “I’ve been trying all day to keep myself busy, but you keep ‘creeping’ into my mind.” The use of “creeping” here is a positive usage, but

creates a negative connotation, exemplifying Buckingham's use of double meaning. This is a mainstay of early country writers, whom Buckingham was undoubtedly influenced.

### Kirsti Manna

Kirsti Manna is a hit songwriter most known for writing Blake Shelton's biggest hit, "Austin," in 2001 but has seen other successes through cuts with bands such as Big and Rich and many others. Kirsti is known as a great songwriting mentor, "with an in depth knowledge of the music business and a vibrant, outgoing personality that puts everyone at ease" (Ribas 2022). Manna still performs these hits, mainly playing select shows at The Bluebird Café and other well-known venues in the Nashville area. Manna also hosts her own podcast called *The Kirsti-Cast*. Manna demonstrates the meaning of hard work and tenacity, even in the face of fear and doubt: "When I first started to get into professional songwriting in Nashville, I learned from the best in town. I put myself into writing sessions that scared me! What I mean by this is I wanted to be challenged by the experience" (Manna 2022). Manna is a lesson that stepping outside one's comfort zone is the best way to expand your songwriting horizons.

I will be performing "What You're Made of," a country song written for movie synchronization. Many country writers write music developed specifically for placements in television and film, known as sync writing. "What You're Made Of" uses specific imagery and storytelling to inspire courage and strength in the listener. The vocal line becomes more melodically challenging throughout the song while shifting up an octave in the choruses to elicit an uplifting and spiritual feeling.

## Christopher DeLisle

Belmont University Alumni Christopher DeLisle is an active singer, session guitarist, and songwriter in the Nashville community. “After achieving some success from cuts with Irish country artist Kathy Crinion, DeLisle moved back to Nashville to pursue his “career as a songwriter and guitar artist” (DeLisle 2022). Known in town as a virtuosic guitar player, Chris uses his distinct style, fast moving guitar parts, and wailing powerful baritone voice to rowdy even the quietest of audiences. In an article by Music City Nashville, Chris is described as a “leader” who will augment the performances of others with his guitar stylings and is known for his dynamic performances on guitar on and off stage (Lynch 2020). With decades of experience, Christopher is a key songwriter in the local Nashville music scene and has developed into one of the most dynamic performing songwriters one can find on the stages of Nashville (DeLisle 2018)

I will be performing “Rednecks Don’t Drink Water,” which encapsulates DeLisle’s southern rock influence, as well as his vocal stylings that are primarily based in Southern roots music. The song begins with a quintessential drop-D guitar riff, a hallmark of Chris’s style, used in many of his other songs such as “Talking Country” and “Rock and Roll Banjo.” DeLisle plays primarily in this tuning to match with his strong baritone voice. The ostinato guitar riff used in the verses exhibits how DeLisle writes his music. First, he will develop a guitar riff or motif and build around this concept through traditional techniques such as theme and variation and blues forms and techniques. This is markedly different than other writers of the Nashville scene, who work primarily

around chords, imagery, and repeated harmonic motives. DeLisle feels this instead through the guitar, and there is a great deal of featured guitar work on this song.

Joseph Wandass, IV (J4)

I will finish the recital by performing a song entitled “Buffalo,” which I wrote about my hometown Buffalo, New York. Originally written as an ode to the Buffalo Bills, the song found great success on TikTok, generating over 100,000 streams in just three months. This was noticed by Buffalo media stations and was played on 106.5 WYRK Radio (Daye 2022). This song was premiered at The Backlot opening for legendary USO songwriter Darryl Worley on September 9 2022, in honor of the first responders to September 11, 2001. This song showcases the elements of prosody, authenticity, and vocal delivery that I learned through co-writing with the previously discussed artists.

## **Conclusion**

Nashville songwriting is a craft that developed as the result of many factors coming together, fueled in part by networking and the sharing of information across migratory patterns. It is a craft that requires time, attention to detail, and the highest level of technical and artistic skill. Musical collaboration between co-writers involves an intricate combination of talent, understanding, and creativity. The Nashville country songwriting community produces a broad spectrum of new music inspired by writers of all ages, styles, and personalities. This selection of writers exemplifies multiple facets of Nashville songwriting from artful crafting to production songwriting.

Nashville is a place that is near and dear to my heart. After working in the professional Nashville music scene for 10 years, I have had the unique perspective of being both an industry professional and a college student while writing this paper. I have noticed many trends myself, and in this conclusion, I will draw attention to some patterns that I have seen in the Nashville music scene.

I perceive that there is a disparity between young and old writers. I hear from the older writers every week regarding the lack of young artists seeking to release older writers' songs. Nashville is full of unbridled talent. The issue is that young writers fear working with older writers past their prime due to the writers being perceived as being "washed up." I believe that without the wisdom of the older writers who have created this

path for us, how are we to lead each other? I implore all young writers reading this paper to find just one older writer who has done something of note in the industry and learn all that one can learn from them. A seventy-year-old writer is a library of knowledge that has been developed over 40-60 years constantly waiting to be discovered and rediscovered.

Do not be too afraid to chase after seemingly impossible opportunities. One key theme of many of the songwriters about which we have spoken is tenacity: the desire to keep on going no matter what, and the power of perseverance. I will always remember being incredibly afraid to ask Jan Buckingham, the legendary writer herself, to cowrite. Yet now, four years later, I have an incredible relationship with a writer who wrote for the artists I grew up idolizing. In this industry, unless you seek the success and put yourself out there, it will not come to you.

Also, do not allow social media and modern comparison culture to hold you back. I see many students of mine, as well as colleagues, get caught up in a game of numbers, trying to make themselves look good to online listeners and better than their respective competition. However, this is an ultimately futile pursuit. Spend your time developing yourself as a musician, not a series of online algorithms. As I have discussed, Nashville is a town that takes a decade to establish oneself. Without the proper time spent on developing your craft, you will be competing against artists and songwriters who have spent that proper time, putting you at a disadvantage if you do not work to the same standards as other professionals.

Finally, I want to discuss a few of the major points that I have learned from the writers of this recital that have carried into various cowrites and writing opportunities. First, the art of the “hang” is incredibly important. Being able to be a fun, amenable, and

low maintenance person in the writing room allows the other writer or writers to open up their ideas more easily. Secondly, never say the word “no” in a writing room. Use any analogous combination of words to circumvent this toxic, life-sucking word, as it refutes the idea of another writer, and in co-writing, no idea is a bad idea. The third point I carry into my cowrites is to be versatile but always be yourself. Many artists come to Nashville and feel as though they have to pretend to be someone they are not, put on a thick pretend Southern accent, and wear a cowboy hat when they have never been to a farm in their entire life. People are attracted to authenticity, and authenticity will often breed greater longevity in both artist and writing careers. Country listeners do not listen for the accent or the packaging—these listeners tune in to the lyrics and the heart and soul behind the performance.

Co-writing has been the joy of my life and has brought so much happiness into my musical career. Being a successful songwriter allows me to have an ethos and legitimacy as an artist which has helped me grow connections in areas of the industry by utilizing skills beyond my vocal prowess. I do not know the future of the industry, but I hope that those reading this paper will use the advice of myself and other Nashville songwriters to assist in the understanding of their life path and experiences here in Nashville as they cowrite into their respective musical futures.

## **Appendix A: Interview with Jan Buckingham**

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the “Nashville dream” as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

My path as a songwriter was unconscious. I just started writing songs at eight years of age, a little bit, and then a lot at age twenty-five. I entered the American Song Festival and got a booklet telling me that I should move to New York, Los Angeles, or Nashville, and Nashville was the closest, so I moved to Nashville with my now second ex-husband. I've been writing songs in Nashville since 1980, and blindly bumbled into many cuts. I just write because I love to do it.

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

Back in the day, we all wrote around a table and then went into a studio to cut a demo, and then pitched the demo. Now more and more people write to tracks, and now, with the internet and YouTube and TikTok and all the other new platforms available, there are many new ways to get your songs out there to be heard.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

Back in the 80s, you could get into a lot of companies on music row, both publishing and record companies, right off the street. Today there are guards at all the doors, and you really have to know somebody to get in at all.

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What led you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**



I came to Nashville because it was the closest to where I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, at the time. I have made a lot of trips to Los Angeles, in the past, to write songs there, but Nashville is a sweet Southern town with some of the greatest writers and musicians living here. It's just too comfortable here to leave and go to an even bigger city.

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honky-tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

I used to perform more downtown, but these days, parking is a b\*\*\*\*, so I prefer to perform at local venues where the parking is more accessible. Also, downtown, they want you to play covers, and I love to play the songs that I have written, both the ones that have been cut, and the ones that have not. At the venues where I play, all the songwriters must play only songs that they have written. Downtown, you mostly have to play radio hit.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

My two biggest lyric idols are Chuck Berry and Don Henley. As far as bands, I go back to and love the *Lovin' Spoonful* with lead singer and writer John Sebastian, *Canned Heat*, *Crosby, Stills and Nash*, and many more. I Also loved story songs like "Tennessee Stud," "Coat of Many Colors," and many more from long ago. Today, country songs sound more like 80s pop songs and 90s Hip Hop songs with a country twang to them. I'm really a fan of old school country.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

Dolly Parton because she's a great storyteller.

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like-minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

Two heads are better than one. A song gets finished faster, many times, with two or three writers on it. I believe you have to say up front, before you start to co-write, that the song shares, music and lyrics, are split up equally, so nobody fights over that later.

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

Co-writing often works very well, but I also sometimes write a song alone. It just depends on the day and the idea and what I have or have not booked for that day. I love writing with J4 because he is quick and articulate and really fast musically, to that frees me up to concentrate on the lyrics and together we finish a song fast!

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience?**

Where is the industry headed? I have no crystal ball. I am hoping that old school country will regain some popularity, because I love the old classic melodies, and the stories told in old school country.

## **Appendix B: Interview with Paul Ivy**

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the "Nashville dream" as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

I have been a songwriter all my life as long as I can remember. From folk, to pop to rock to country. But my roots have always been in bluegrass and country music. Nashville has always been the holy grail of country music songwriting and I knew there would have to come a time to try my hand in Nashville.

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

Yes, I have seen the latest trends that are in town. For myself, I'm not really interested in those things, and I basically am more concerned with writing a good song old school.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

I have only been here 5 years now, but I can see the lure this town has on so many young writers. I think the mistake I see most often is the thinking that with 3 chords I can get famous. It's simple, easy and I don't have to know that much music education or training.

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What lead you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**

The atmosphere in Nashville is very supportive. I have lived in those other cities, and they are not as friendly to up and coming artists and players.

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honky-tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

These lower broad bars are tourist attractions, and they are what makes Nashville a popular place to visit. It brings in good money to the town while letting musicians and artists practice their chops.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

Any singer songwriter is my influence. There are too many to list. Whoever they are showed me you can have a vision and tell your story in song.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

I'd love to write with Casey Breatherd, Billy Montana, Jeff Steele. Again, there's so many.

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like-minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

Bouncing ideas off another writer is a great way to not only get a good song but also to see how another writer thinks. It is a very creative atmosphere.

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

Co-writing is what makes Nashville tick. You should be able to write a song single handed but the co-write is how most hits are written. especially if there is an artist attached to the write. My musical education is far from what you have learned and studied so when I write with you, I know with your musical knowledge we can go into the place musically I might not have the expertise to get to.

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience?**

I really don't think that much will change. It all starts with a good song. I know there is great technology out there and, on the way, but no machine, track, or any electronic will ever take the place of the heart and that's where great songs come from. Will love ever be replaced? Doubtful.

## Appendix C: Interview with Scott Barrier

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the "Nashville dream" as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

My songwriting path has been a series of fits and starts. As a young kid, I loved all kinds of music, which inspired me want to learn how to play an instrument. It started with trumpet, then I moved onto piano, and then guitar. I played trumpet in middle school band for 3-4 years and then had to quit when I got braces. So, I began to learn how to play piano at the age of 14 or 15. I enjoyed creating my own progressions and melodies on the piano, and that inspired me to try to write lyrics over what I created (which were not very good). At that time, I was more interested in poetry, not lyric writing. I didn't realize it was preparing me to do just that. I was, admittedly, a part time hobbyist songwriter in my teens, more dabbling than seriously jumping into full time writing. When I started learning how to play acoustic guitar in my teens, I applied some of what I learned on the piano, and started creating progressions on the guitar as well, trying to write songs with the guitar. I caught the songwriting bug around that time and decided to join a band. I learned from the other musicians around me about collaborative creation of songs, and did "band writing" with those musicians, where someone would start playing a riff on guitar or on piano or bass, or the drummer would play a groove. Then we would start to throw ideas around, eventually creating a song. I did spend time on my own writing to learn how to write a better song. Every band I was in, and musician I worked with, taught me something about songwriting and music creation. Along the way I also took some music theory in college to give me a broader and more solid foundation in musical knowledge. Regardless, for a while, I convinced myself that music wasn't a smart career to get into, so I went into the corporate world for a bit but was miserable. I went back to music and decided to make it my life's passion to create original music and to make a living at it, so, I moved to Nashville in my 20's to be around the music community. At first, I decided to take the route of joining a band and for many years toured and played out around Nashville. Along the way, I wrote here and there on my own, and tried collaborative writing with other writers in Nashville, but not very often. I wasn't too interested in the collaborative writing process, but when I decided to no longer be a touring and performing musician, I joined NSAI to learn how to be a commercial writer and to get involved in the writing and publishing side of the music business in Nashville. And so, to your question: "How would I describe the "Nashville Dream?" Well, for me, I'm living some of that dream. I've been blessed to write full time, building working relationships with other writers and artists, and have enjoyed the blessing of having many of my songs recorded by artists and have had songs in movies and on TV. Those "wins" or "successes" have helped to inspire me to continue on this journey of

music creation. My dream is to keep creating songs that artists want to record, to have major hit songs, and to get large placements in the sync world (film, tv, etc.). However, while I'm working toward loftier goals, I am literally "living the dream" by being able to work on music every day of my life. Pretty amazing!

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

Some of the writing processes have stayed the same. Collaborative writing, or co-writing, still involves songwriters and artists getting together to come up with an idea to write about and then working on a song together. Some of the rules of writing have shifted a bit in regard to structure, rhyme scheme, etc. since we've had more pop, Americana, and hip-hop artists, songwriters, producers, etc. move to Nashville. This has brought "track writing" (top lining, production writing) to Nashville. I find it to be great because it's providing more and diverse opportunities to make music and to work with a variety of talented people in many genres. I think it's great! Overall, songwriters in Nashville have had to become more flexible and open to writing more styles of music to make a living. Sync music, or music for film, tv etc., has challenged and inspired Nashville writers to broaden their horizons and become multi-genre writers. But, with the changes in the distribution of music, moving from record, CD and digital download sales and radio play to online access to music, primarily through streaming, songwriters have had more opportunities to release their music and promote it to the public. These have their own challenges of course, because it costs money to produce and promote songs, which can become very expensive in a short amount of time. Also, the streaming services and major labels still hold sway and control over the music industry, but at least independent artists and writers have been given various avenues to try to disseminate music. The obvious downside, since record, CD, and digital download have become practically instinct, streaming payouts have been abysmal and have made it very hard for any writer, and many artists, to make living. We, as songwriters, artists, music creators, as I mentioned before, have had to learn to become more diverse with how and what we write and create, and have had to continue to broaden our knowledge base when it comes to making music.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

I think many artists and writers around the United States have bought into a delusional idea about how easy it is to make in Nashville because of shows like the Nashville TV show. Though the show portrayed the seedier side of the music industry, it also gave the false impression that if an artist or writer would come to Nashville, it wouldn't be too difficult to become successful. So, the Nashville community has been overwhelmed by thousands and thousands of artists and writers who come here "to make it". Once many of them spend some time here they have a reality wakeup call and witness first-hand how difficult it is to break into such a competitive and closed industry. They lose hope, give up, and leave. Others who love music with a passion stay and learn to find ways be part of the music community and industry, which takes time, patience, and a lot of hard work.

Some of those who stay and stick in there find some kind of success, and that is defined by each individual. I admire the dreams and the desires of anyone who has the courage to come to Nashville to try to make it. I wish them all luck and success! After all, Nashville is a magical city, and we are the capital of songwriting in the world, and it is a great music community here. That's what has kept me here all of these years (and of course, being able create music with amazingly talented people!).

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What lead you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**

I visited all three cities to find out where I wanted to move to be close to the music industry. After being in New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville, I found the Nashville music community more welcoming and accessible than the other communities. I immediately had opportunities available to me that I could not get or find in New York or Los Angeles. Besides, Nashville is a

great city, and a Tennessee is a great place to live. Plus, the cost of living is better than New York or Los Angeles.

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honkey tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

It's been difficult to see many famous and familiar music venues close and be replaced by a more commercial, tourist focused venue. With the massive influx of people and industries, I witnessed a welcoming, quaint large southern town become a colder, less welcoming major city. Though the traditional music community seemed to have been broken and scattered by this, I am encouraged by the growth because there are now many more venues to perform and to meet other songwriters and artists. I think the industry will go on, but it won't be as accessible to songwriters and artist trying to get into the business. It seems the music industry is more distant from the music community more than ever.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

My biggest influences have been successful songwriters and artists that I have been a fan of or have had the privilege or knowing and/or working with. Their unfaltering drive, passion for music, and amazing creativity has inspired me to continue to create music and build a music career regardless of the challenges, difficulties, and constant let downs that occur in the pursuit of musical success.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

That changes all the time... LOL! I am blessed to be able to write with some songwriters I admire and look up to, and that has been a dream come true. Of course, I want to write with the most successful writers in Nashville. I think I could continue to learn a lot from working with them and would love to create amazing music with them.

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like-minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

When I joined NSAI and learned about the collaborative writing process, I was intimidated. But the more I did it, the more I loved it and found that the music I created with other writers and artists was much better than what I was creating by myself. It's magical when a pair or group of collaborators bring their particular talents and skills sets to a writing session and share those. Amazing and magical things happen in a co-write! Now the reality. Not every writer and artist will get along or work well together, and some are too competitive to work with. So, part of the Nashville songwriter's growth and process is to find like-minded, goal-minded creators that have the same goals and want to work well with, support, and help one another. If you take my example, I have had to write with many artists and songwriters to find my core team that I work well with and create great music with. That takes time, patience, and growth as a person and a music creator.

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

Depending upon the songwriter or artist, co-writing is not for everyone. There are some songwriters and artists who write great by themselves and don't do well as co-writers. And there's nothing wrong with that. Good for them! Since the music "system" in Nashville is based around collaborative writing and music creation, it is wise to, like myself, learn how to co-write and join the process. It expands a songwriter's and artist's knowledge of music and broadens their talent and creativity by working with others and learning from them. Also, co-writing builds relationships and partnerships that benefit all parties who are part of the collaborative process. These relationships can provide opportunities that a songwriter or artist would not have access to by themselves. Also, having more writers on one song gives the song the opportunity to be pitched to multiple sources where the song might have a chance of being successful, which makes all parties associated with the song successful. Plus having a supportive team of creators to work with helps build a songwriter's or artist's confidence and creativity and will keep them driven and inspired to keep working toward their goals and building their careers.

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience?**

Too bad I don't have a crystal ball! It's really difficult to predict where the music industry is headed in the future. I see more of the major labels merging and becoming more closed off to songwriters and artists, which will make it more difficult for



songwriters and artists to break into the music industry (which is ironic because without songwriter and artists, they have nothing). I think the music industry is currently having an identity crisis because streaming destroyed so many traditional practices and institutions. I see many people at many levels of the industry scrambling to try to find new ways to be successful. That has caused a negative downside to the Nashville music industry and community. Where a songwriter or artist used to be able to get a free meeting with an industry professional to try to build a relationship, get a deal, or have a breakthrough, now everyone has to pay for access, otherwise known as “pay to play”. This has made it more difficult for songwriters and artists, who don’t have a lot of money in the first place, to get anywhere. Also, I witness a lot of “dream peddlers” who play upon the unknowing and uneducated songwriters and artist who move here with no knowledge of how the industry works. These peddlers are taking advantage of so many of those who want success so badly. That has been the biggest shame in regard to traditional music sales and royalty payouts being destroyed by streaming. That being said, I still have hope that new music will be created, and new artists and songwriters will be successful because they decided not to give up and are determined to be successful. So, the industry will be the industry, bad or good, but anyone with a dream in their heart and desire to be successful will find a way to do so. Amazing music will continue to be created and great things will still come.

## **APPENDIX D: Interview with Kirsti Manna**

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the "Nashville dream" as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

I came to Nashville not only as a songwriter, but also as an artist and musician. My husband and I were a writing team and got a publishing deal as a team. We were very focused on figuring out how the town worked and also networked quite a bit. I think the Nashville dream is the same for all songwriters...to get cuts that matter and to hear their songs on the radio, to get better at writing commercial music and write songs that impact listeners. It's great to have releases that stream, but there is really nothing like hearing your song on the radio, on an awards show, or having complete strangers express how your song made them feel. My goals as a songwriter have always been the same, to move people with my art, to write and work with others in the music business who recognize my worth and talent.

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

I believe that when songwriters get together in a room, real magic can happen. I'm not sure we can ever replace the energy and excitement that comes with creatives interacting. Track writing and production writing has been around for a while, but with the pandemic, it really came forefront.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

Not sure what you mean by this question.

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What led you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**

I have lived in LA, and I think it's hard to connect with people there. Nashville has always had a small town feel in regards to the songwriting community, even though it has grown so much over the last 5 years.

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honkey tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

I haven't performed in the Lower Broadway venues, but I think the venues downtown are what tourists expect to see in Nashville. I usually try to direct Nashville newcomers to songwriting venues, because to me, that is the true slice of life here that is very unique to Nashville. I haven't found this in any other music center, and I think it is amazing that those of us who live here to get experience writers' nights, whether performing or as audience members.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

My biggest influences have been more about understanding how they create, what makes them tick, and their style of music. I'm really intrigued by the process of creatives. Since I'm a piano player, I've always been drawn to artists who play...Carole King, Elton John, Billy Joel, are a few.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

Hands down, Jeffrey Steele. His songs are so unique and melodic, hooky and moving.

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like-minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

I love cowriting because I'm communal! My philosophy is to write with people who challenge me in some way. I like building song relationships with writers who have a vision for their ideas and who are good listeners. Also, I think it is important to create with people who understand how you like to work and respect that in the writing room or writing session.

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

I really liked writing with you because I think you have a lot of talent. I like being in the room with someone who has fresh ideas and also, I love writing with people who are younger than me; brings a new perspective because they are at a different place in their life.

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience?**

I think that Nashville's landscape may change, but that songwriters who connect first as people will always want to try and create songs together. Also, as a songwriter, I'm always inspired to write with someone who inspires me. I'm curious and want to see what we will come up with! I think it's important to understand how other creatives create, to learn from their mistakes and their successes. I think the industry, as far as Nashville is concerned will always look for the next hit songwriter.

## **Appendix E: Interview with Christopher DeLisle**

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the "Nashville dream" as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

I began writing songs at 14 as a response to the first anniversary of the September 11th attacks. It was a school assignment that led to me sitting down with a guitar and writing a song for the first time. After about 15 minutes in my room, I emerged with a completed song having never tried anything like that before. I have been writing ever since. I came to Nashville to become a professional musician by attending Belmont University for guitar performance, but I switched into Songwriting as I felt more at home being creative in that way. I learned quickly the "Nashville Dream" was about fame and success and networking with whoever necessary to achieve that, or so it seemed to me at the time. Now after all this time I think the real "Nashville Dream" is to be able to pay your bills, support a family, and earn the respect of your peers by being a writer and musician. Anything beyond that in terms of success is just icing on the cake. I think this understanding has made me take a step back from chasing shiny objects and really focus on who I am, what I want to do, and who my people are. I find the fans of my work that truly love what I do, and I work daily to try to develop more opportunities as a musician so I can eventually fully support myself with music. I've let go of the idea of being successful in the way many of us view it (fame, glory, money) and now I see success as just doing what I'm good at and what I love to do for people who love that I do it and making enough money to have a career in that arena. I've become much more simple in my understanding of being successful. Anything above that, like fame and glory, is just a welcomed blessing should it happen, but it's no longer the benchmark.

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

I feel like songwriters have split into two groups as a result of new technology. There are those who write incredible songs that will last for a long time. They create incredible art using instruments and lyrics to delve into the emotions that make us human. Whether it's to have a good time, to feel sadness while processing something, to feel nostalgic about our past, or any myriad of feelings like these, the goal is to create art that elicits a response in our souls that make life better. Sometimes they use technology to do this, but the technology is never the focus but rather a tool to achieve the goal. The other type of writer is one that uses computers, tracks, formulas, and other technology to create technically correct music, but it makes little to no impact. There is such a strong focus on

those elements in a large population of people claiming to be musicians that they've lost what makes creating music special. Because of this, and social media as well, some people who have money to buy the gear and financially influence their way into surface level opportunities are flooding the market with mediocrity, and it's difficult for others who want to truly be accomplished musicians and writers to swim through this murky water to finally get to a place where fans can see what they do and truly value the time they've put into learning their craft. The technology can expedite many things for us as musicians, but it can also open a door to mediocre music and writing from anyone with a whim that they want to be a famous musician and writer.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

So many people see this path in pop culture where you move to a city that has a big music scene, you get discovered for playing a song or two, and overnight you're successful and famous and loved and wealthy. This idea plays to the desires of human beings wishing for fame, power, and wealth. Everyone wants to be important, and this path looks like one that can lead you there quicker than most if you only understand it on the surface. The only changes I've really seen in this concept are the tools the community uses to try to get there. It used to be Broadway bars, clubs, and writers rounds. More and more, it is changing to social media fame and online technology that makes someone look famous and successful without actually being that good at what they do, so it's becoming a back door approach for some. In the end I still think the best writers and musicians who are hardworking, reliable, good people will outlast the others and prevail, but the culture to get to that point of achieving the dream is in a strange place right now.

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What lead you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**

Los Angeles and New York do not align with many of the things I want in life. The size of the city, the culture of the people that live there, all of that and more affects how the industry will work and what life will be like there. Politically Tennessee is more home for me. The music industry approaches things here in a way I value (like putting live musicians in a studio together to create a track rather than using digital technology to do everything remotely and send your track element back). Nashville still cares a great deal about the history of musicians and writers, and that is important to my philosophy of what makes great music. I also can't afford to live in New York or LA, and if I have to work my life away to be there, I have no time to be a musician anyway. I am also a country writer and guitarist, and there's not a lot of love for that style of music in those cities in my experience. I came here for college, but I found the market that I can call home. There's no better place for me to be a musician than here in Nashville.

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honkey tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

All I have seen in these changes is negative. I have heard countless stories of young musicians (in their 20s) having to go to doctors for hand pain or vocal issues because they are killing themselves 8 hours or more per day, five and six days a week, with no rest, playing on Broadway because tourism drives the desire for constant music. The bar owners have the attitude of, "If you're not willing to do it I have plenty of people in line to play who will". I have heard more quantity and less quality come out of Broadway over the last 5 years than I ever expected to in my life. World renowned musicians I know have moved away from Nashville because the gigs have dried up (because other less-talented musicians will play for cheap or free) and the music scene is all about urban beats and pop sounds and the musical talent of these legends isn't valued anymore. Bachelorette parties want club music to drink to but have no appreciation for what made Nashville special from the beginning. It's sad to see, but Broadway has become a ruined tourist trap and is someplace I have no desire to perform anymore. There are very few musicians I know who play Broadway now and get any kind of future success from it. Most of them I've seen go that route start playing whatever they have to for the tips they need to make a living and never get out to be a writer or artist of their own ever again.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

All of the country guitarists are huge influences for me. Brent Mason, Johnny Hiland, Vince Gill, Jerry Reed, Ricky Skaggs, the list is endless. They have all paved the way for what incredible country guitar should sound like. More importantly, they've taught me the importance of melody and signature hook guitar parts and how those are vital in supporting great songs to become the hits we all know and love. Everyone knows what song is starting to play before the first lyric because of signature instrumental parts. We love the lyrics, but we're moved carnally by the musical elements that frame them. I'm also massively influenced by great writers. Some of my more recent influences are Brandy Clark, Ashley McBryde, and Luke Combs, but I was originally struck by writers like Pat Alger, Tom Douglas, Thom Schuyler, and more. All great writers like this influence me to always look for a way to say something important that the whole world can identify with yet hasn't actually ever been said in that way before.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

That's a difficult thing to narrow down to just one person, but if I was to pick one, I'd feel good about choosing Brandy Clark. As a writer she has a tongue-in-cheek humor that I really enjoy, and her ability to craft songs that speak to average people is unparalleled in the modern writing scene in my opinion. I feel like I would learn a great deal about myself and about songwriting from her. There are many others I'd like to work with too, but she'd be a fantastic person to start with.

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like-minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

Co-writing, whether as a writer or an artist, is how networking is done. You don't understand someone fully until you sit in a room and create with them. To write you have to be open, vulnerable, honest, and invested. In that moment you truly see who someone is, and you know how to work with them in the future. It also brings together multiple ideas to create the best possible product that goes beyond what you can usually do on your own. It's rare that a writer gets their best work by themselves as we bring out the best in each other when the chemistry is right. If you don't co-write, I feel like people in town don't trust you. Even if you don't do it regularly, being open to it is a vital element of how the community sees you as someone they want to work with.

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

Co-writing might be the optimal way to write, or it may not. That depends entirely on the song you're writing, the purpose for writing it, and who you are or are not writing with. When I write alone, I create things in a style that most writers I've worked with don't understand because I approach it as a guitarist who is also a songwriter. I use an intimate connection between my instrument, music theory, and songwriting when I create something. Co-writing is more of an experience where I bring my outlook to the table to enhance the strength another writer has. This makes my work and theirs become greater than the sum of the parts (hopefully). That only works in the right circumstances and with the right people, but you'll never know who the right people are or what the right circumstances require if you don't try over and over again. In writing with you I have learned how to approach writing with the strengths I have and to leave space for the strengths of others simultaneously. It's easy to overrun another writer if you put everything of yours on the table and don't listen to someone else's ideas. Writing with you gave me a better understanding of what I'm best at in a room and how to leave space for you to fill in with your strengths as well, and through that I have become a better co-writer for others as well.

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience?**

I think the industry is headed down a path that goes away from quality music in the short term. However, I believe that will run its course and there will be a resurgence of great songs and great musicians on the back end of that. The current approach to music in Nashville is flooding the market, and eventually that excitement will dry up as more and more people realize it takes a lot of work to be a great musician and songwriter, and there's often little to know recognition, money, or fame that comes with it. You have to love it to keep going. When that becomes more widely known I think the flood will stop and great musicians will start to stand out again. In the meantime, co-writing has become (and will continue to become) the best way to size up the musicians around you, to network, and to find your group of people to work with and rely on. I think co-writing will become more digital in the near future before eventually going back to being face to face again. Everything we've been through has shown us that we can persevere through



anything, pandemics and recessions included, and those of us willing to put in the hours and to refuse to give up will still be here on the other side of the wave.

## Appendix F: Interview with Norm McDonald

**What was your path like as a songwriter? How would you describe the "Nashville dream" as a songwriter working in the industry for at least a decade? Did this affect your path, or the vision of your songwriting path?**

Growing up, my mother played nothing but country music on the radio and phonograph. I have been influenced by some of the most melodic, country music to this day: Blue Blue Day, Hello Walls, Oh Lonesome Me, I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry and just about anything from the Everly Brothers. Then the British Invasion came: Beatles, Stones, Animals, Herman's Hermits, Troggs, etc.. That got my attention and made me want to write songs.'

I started writing songs about 1968, when I was 16 years old. I was influenced by the Beatles, Dave Clark Five, Rolling Stones, The Animals, The Kinks and soon by Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Credence Clearwater and Bob Segar. About that time I started playing guitar and helped form various basement bands with different friends. We attempted a few copy songs but usually spent more time on the originals. I played in several basement bands until 1971 when I joined a nine piece band that played all kinds of rock music. There was a four piece horn section with two lead singers and four part harmony. I was one of the two lead singers. Our music styles had quite a range from Chicago, Blood Swear and Tears, Three Dog Night, Neil Young to 50's & 60's Sha Na Na type oldies music. We opened as a 50's style band for Jerry Lee Lewis to 20,000 people on the Main Stage at Summerfest in Milwaukee in 1972 and quickly rose to local prominence as one of the most popular "Oldies" bands in the Midwest. We rode on that 50's revival wave for about four years. The band then evolved into what can only be described as Saturday Night Live as a Rock Band playing 75% original rock songs. This lasted until 1985 when the band broke up and I moved to New York City for a year to try and make it as a singer-songwriter or actor - whichever came first.

Neither one of those seemed like a possibility at the time in NYC, so I moved back to West Palm Beach, Florida and worked in a couple of "real jobs" for many years. The desire to create and write new songs, however, never left. After a few years of tinkering I found myself telling others that I was "a songwriter." This declaration helped me to focus on bettering myself. A fellow songwriter in West Palm Beach told me about NSAI. I joined and found myself coming up to Nashville several times a year for about eight years to learn the craft of songwriting. (I thought I was a pretty good songwriter until I came to Nashville!) I learned so much by writing with other "seasoned" songwriters who had very different experiences than I did. Eventually, I started writing with younger writers and passed on what I had learned from the pros.

My Nashville Dream is simply to write & perform better and better songs. Eventually I hope an artist or two might catch the vision of one of my songs and take it to the next level.

**Have you seen a shift recently in the ways in which songwriters create and disseminate music, particularly with the advent of new techniques in writing such as track writing and production writing?**

I have seen this and don't feel as comfortable with it as I do with writing it from scratch.

**Why do you think the "Nashville dream" became such a societal construct, and have you seen changes in this concept during your time in Nashville?**

When I first started coming to Nashville it was all focused on Music Row. Now, Music Row feels like something from the recent past. I have only written on music row about 10 times in 14 years. The stories I heard when I first came were the success stories of writers who hung with the artists, managers & producers on Music Row and how they networked and hung together to make music. Now, it's hard to understand what to do, who to talk to and what's next as to what artists are really looking for.

**Why choose Nashville? Los Angeles and New York are, by nature, larger markets, and yet you've chosen this wonderful city. What lead you here to Nashville and why do you choose to stay?**

Nashville folks seem to be more real and interested in you as much as themselves being successful. It's not as dog-eat-dog as it seemed to be in NYC. There is always someone in Nashville to be a friend and help in any way they are able. We moved our family of five here and each of them have made roots here. We love it here!

**How do you feel about the current changes and gentrification to music venues such as lower Broadway, and various honkey tonks you have performed? Do you believe these are positive or negative changes for the city and for country music?**

I have watched lower Broadway evolve from a sleepy music strip to Nash-Vegas. It is not what most of us would like to see but it is inevitable with growth. Someone let the cat out of the bag - NASHVILLE is one of the coolest & best places to be! Now, a LOT of people have found out and are moving here. I watched this happen to Atlanta about 40-45 years ago. Atlanta is still a really cool place but with many, many, many more people.

I have never performed on lower Broadway. If I had, I would have preferred the old days.

**Who are your biggest influences, and why have they influenced you in such a profound way?**

My favorite songwriter is John Sebastian of The Lovin Spoonful. When I write a rock song it would have to be The Kinks, Beatles & Rolling Stones. Country would be Don Gibson & Darius Rucker. I love simple uplifting stories with memorable melodies.

**If you could write a song with any songwriter in town currently still alive who would it be and why?**

Darius Rucker. I think we have similar styles and I love his songs!

**What is your philosophy on the "Co-write" and why is it so important to write with other like minded writers in a non-competitive environment?**

I prefer the "co-write." We each grow up in different environments with different life experiences, different expressions and different understanding of how things work. For example: if I place an object or idea in the middle of a table of writers from different backgrounds and style preferences each person will have a different way of describing it. We can all listen and decide which direction to take that object or line or hook. Someone may see it in a totally different light that we have ever heard and that's exciting!

**Is co-writing the optimal way to write, and if so, why? What have you noticed in your writing with me that has shown the benefits of intellectual cooperation and mutual expression in the field of songwriting?**

Yes, I believe it is the optional way to write as stated above. There have been times when I have brought an idea to you with a weak approach. Being younger and with your own life to reach back in for experience you have helped me find new ways to express the lyrics and a younger way musically.

**Where do you think the industry is headed? What changes do you expect in the near future to the cowriting experience.**

I believe the co-writer experience will continue. There will always be the dream of getting big cuts but I believe people will continue to write songs together. It's what creatives have to do. Why not do it with someone else who understands that passion!?

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