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ART REVIEW

## ‘Dylan, Cash and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City’ Review

In the '60s Music Row's focus expanded beyond traditional country into the overlapping arenas of rock, commercial folk and singer-songwriter artistry



Randy Scruggs, Earl Scruggs, Bob Dylan and Gary Scruggs c. 1972. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SONY MUSIC ARCHIVES AND THE COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME/MUSEUM

By **BARRY MAZOR**

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**Dylan, Cash and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City**

*Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum*

*Through Dec. 31, 2016*

*Nashville, Tenn.*

In the mid-1960s, a transformation in Music Row music-making extended from the production of country into

the overlapping arenas of rock, commercial folk and singer-songwriter artistry, breaking down genre barriers and creating musical possibilities. The immediate reasons: Bob Dylan found Nashville surprisingly congenial in 1966, when he recorded “Blonde on Blonde” here, at the height of his rock influence, and then, beginning in 1969, Johnny Cash repeatedly welcomed a wide range of

visiting music makers to his prime-time variety show, changing often negative preconceptions of this town's music-making environment. Performers well beyond country's usual orbit saw the advantages of working with the versatile, ready and skillful session musicians who made Music Row's studios their home.

The far-flung impact of those episodes has rarely been grasped whole, but that is the accomplishment of "Dylan, Cash and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City," a major new 5,000-square-foot exhibition at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum running through Dec. 31, 2016.

With revealing displays, rarely seen artifacts, music and video, the exhibition shows the working of the Dylan-Cash friendship and their musical endeavors; the resulting arrival of varied recording acts in Nashville studios; and—especially fresh and welcome—the contributions of the generation of Nashville studio musicians, the "Nashville Cats," who made this new coalition work. They included guitarists Wayne Moss, Charlie Daniels, Mac Gayden, Norman Blake and Grady Martin; pedal steel guitar players Lloyd Green, Pete Drake, Weldon Myrick and Ben Keith; pianists David Briggs and Hargus "Pig" Robbins; drummer Kenny Buttrey, bass player Norbert Putnam and harmonica master Charlie McCoy—all players whose music would resonate on celebrated recordings of the era and for years to come.

The exhibit's narrative begins with Bob Dylan's rise as a singing songwriter, with early support, when it counted the most, from his far-more-established Columbia Records label mate, Johnny Cash. Displays track their evolving friendship, which began with a face-to-face meeting at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival and continued as Mr.

Dylan moved from protest songs and acoustic balladry to rock stardom. The next phase of the exhibit's story begins with the rock star's increasingly countrified recordings of 1966-1970 made on Music Row.

Toward the other end of the exhibit space, Johnny Cash is presented, with his moves from the Sun label and near-rockabilly recordings to mainstream country at Columbia, with excursions into the commercial folk world—paving the way to his hit Ryman Auditorium-based variety show. That TV series would find room for everyone from country legends to Ray Charles, Eric Clapton and, on the very first episode, Mr. Dylan.

Between the exhibition's poles of Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash lies its conceptual heart—showing the many artists who made their way to Nashville, where they came from, and what the musicians they found here brought to their sessions.

Some of the first who followed Mr. Dylan south were acts recording on the New York folk label Vanguard, which was soon advertising Nashville albums from Doc Watson, Joan Baez and the Canadians Ian & Sylvia and Buffy Sainte-Marie. There had always been a country tinge in Canadian commercial folk; soon Leonard Cohen, Gordon Lightfoot and Neil Young would be recording in town, too.

West Coast rockers also headed to Music Row—from the Monkees' Mike Nesmith to Leon Russell, Doug Sahm, Tracy Nelson, Linda Ronstadt and, most famously perhaps, the Byrds of the "Sweetheart of the Rodeo" era. The exhibit reminds us that many noncountry fans were introduced to the sound of pedal steel through Nashville Cat Lloyd Green's playing on that album. (The Sho-Bud pedal steel guitar he used is on display here for the first time.)

Visitors can also see the original handwritten Dylan-Cash lyrics for “Wanted Man,” the Martin guitar Mr. Dylan used in the early ’60s, artwork and original notes for major LPs of the era, Cash and Dylan stage clothes, appreciation letters written to Nashville Cats by George Harrison and Ms. Baez, and, in the video displays, that first “Johnny Cash Show” in which the Man in Black duets with an apparently nervous Mr. Dylan.

Another set of displays spotlights the various sessions the central Nashville players worked on, sometimes on the same day—a Tammy Wynette track here, a Paul McCartney track there (British rockers started to show up, too)—letting us hear and see performers crossing genre lines, and giving us as concrete a sense of the fruits of this multiyear musical conversation as has been offered anywhere. Today, it’s striking how ready those players were for this musical expansion—many having migrated to this city from eclectic backgrounds before becoming new country aces themselves.

An unprecedented boxed set bringing together these musical exchanges is set for later this year. The Country Music Foundation has already released an exciting, well-illustrated book that shares the exhibition’s title and territory.

Personally, I would love to see some programs during the exhibit’s run that explore how these events changed Nashville thinking about country song content and sound. At Columbia’s Music Row Studio on the same day in February 1966, Ray Price was recording “A Way To Survive,” a country hit about a jilted lover clinging to old photos and letters, and Mr. Dylan was recording “Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again,” about more existential issues. There were now quite varied ways to be stuck. Meanwhile, a then-unknown Kris Kristofferson was working as the janitor, emptying ashtrays for both performers. A new synthesis was coming.

Performances, screenings and talks are scheduled throughout the exhibition's run. At an opening-weekend show, featuring session players who formed the band Area Code 615 and their friends, the closing ensemble number was, inevitably perhaps, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Taking choruses were both scruff-rock-influenced singers such as Jon Langford and Old Crow Medicine Show's Ketch Secor on the one hand, and the more traditionally polished country singer Deana Carter, daughter of Nashville Cat Fred Carter Jr., on the other. This thrilling exhibit shows us how such a once-unlikely blend became par for the course.

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