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Pop

When Dylan and Friends Met Nashville

A new exhibition chronicles an unlikely musical collaboration.

By ALAN LIGHT

NASHVILLE — In recent years, lots of attention has been paid to Nashville's expansion beyond the country music community, as rockers like Jack White, the Black Keys and Kings of Leon have relocated here to take advantage of the history, atmosphere and infrastructure of Music City, U.S.A. But this, of course, isn't the first time that artists outside the country tradition have been attracted to Nashville. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, dozens of rock and folk acts traveled to Tennessee and, in a series of unlikely alliances, emerged with an astonishing number of big hits and classic recordings.

The era is documented in "Dylan, Cash and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City," an ambitious exhibition that opened last week at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. The show points to three primary forces behind the migration to the Music Row studios: Bob Dylan's journey here to record the "Blonde on Blonde" album in 1966; the ABC television series "The Johnny Cash Show," which filmed at the Ryman Auditorium from 1969 until 1971; and an extraordinary group of session musicians informally known as the "Nashville Cats," who played in one form or fashion on virtually all of these recordings, including albums by Neil Young, Leonard Cohen, Linda Ronstadt, Simon and Garfunkel, and three of the four Beatles.

"When Bob Dylan came here, he changed what people thought of Nashville," said Michael Gray, museum editor at the Hall of Fame and principal curator of the exhibition. "At that time, Nashville was perceived as being this conservative, Southern town that was not really following the trends of pop music — basically a backwater. But after Dylan came here, people took notice."

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ERNIE WINFREY/COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

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Pete Finney, a guest co-curator for this exhibition, said that Mr. Dylan's endorsement aside, "The real reason they came was the quality of the players, the diversity and open-mindedness, which was a surprise to some of them."

The design of the show reflects this unexpected, fruitful dynamic. In addition to sections dedicated to Mr. Dylan and Mr. Cash, the space is ringed by display cases arranged to highlight the cities and scenes from which the visiting musicians came. The center of the room is devoted to instruments, artifacts and listening kiosks featuring 16 players who formed the core of the Nashville Cats — names like Norbert Putnam; Hargus Robbins, a.k.a. Pig; and Kenny Buttrey — and became familiar to anyone who pored over classic rock album credits. A series of portraits painted by Jon Langford of the Mekons fills the hallway leading into the exhibition. Sony plans to release a two-album compilation of the Cats' greatest hits on its Legacy label.

The movement began when the producer Bob Johnston invited the multi-instrumentalist Charlie McCoy, who was visiting New York to see the World's Fair in 1965, to drop by one of Mr. Dylan's sessions. Mr. Dylan asked Mr. McCoy to pick up a guitar and accompany the next song he was recording, which turned out to be "Desolation Row," the final track on "Highway 61 Revisited."

In a telephone interview, Mr. McCoy said he suspected that Mr. Johnston was "using me as bait to get Bob to come to Nashville." Impressed by how quickly the sideman was able to pick up a new song, Mr. Dylan agreed to travel south to make his next record, bringing along a couple of musical allies for support.

In his 2004 memoir, "Chronicles," Mr. Dylan wrote that when he arrived in Nashville, the "town was like being in a soap bubble. They nearly ran Al Kooper, Robbie Robertson and me out of town for having long hair." Nonetheless, his trip resulted in the monumental double-album "Blonde on Blonde," which he later told Playboy was "the closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind." He returned to the city, and the backing of its studio players, for his next three records — "John Wesley Harding," "Nashville Skyline" (his most overtly country-based project) and "Self-Portrait."

"Once he put the stamp of approval on Nashville," Mr. McCoy said, "it was like the floodgates opening." Soon the finely tuned, effortlessly versatile Nashville Cats were providing the backbone for landmark albums like the Byrds' "Sweetheart of the Rodeo" and Leonard Cohen's "Songs From a Room," and hits, including Joan Baez's version of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" and Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer." In 1966, the Lovin' Spoonful even recorded the tribute "Nashville Cats" ("Nashville Cats, play clean as country water/Nashville Cats, play wild as mountain dew").

HEIDI DENNING/COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

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Clockwise from top: Bob Dylan, left, Johnny Cash and Bob Johnston; Mr. Johnston, left, Leonard Cohen and Charlie Daniels; an image for the new exhibition; Ernie Winfrey, an engineer, left, Joan Baez and Norbert Putnam; a jacket once worn by Ben Keith; Paul McCartney, left, the producer Buddy Killen, Mr. Winfrey, seated, Tony Dorsey and Linda McCartney.

For the in-demand musicians, the arrival of the rockers added to their already busy plates. This was also a golden era for country music, and these same players were concurrently recording with giants like Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard and George Jones. As seen in the exhibition, Mr. McCoy's 1970 datebook includes a session with Mr. Dylan scrawled in alongside work the same week with Charlie Louvin and Roy Clark.

Charlie Daniels, whose "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" was a No. 1 country hit in 1979, went on to have the most successful solo career of the Cats.

"The studio musicians in Nashville, at least the ones I worked with, were not by any means limited to one genre of music," Mr. Daniels said in an email. "They were capable of doing a rhythm and blues session in the morning, a country session in the afternoon and a rock session at night."

(Mr. Daniels, was singled out for special praise by Mr. Dylan: "When Charlie was around, something good would usually come out of the sessions," he wrote in "Chronicles.")

The influx only increased after "The Johnny Cash Show" made its debut. Mr. Cash, who always prided himself on his catholic tastes in music, offered slots on the program to such young, non-country artists as Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, and Eric Clapton's Derek and the Dominos. Mr. Dylan's friendship with Mr. Cash, which began at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, further solidified these ties between the country and rock communities; Mr. Dylan appeared on the show's first episode and they recorded a duet of "Girl from the North Country" on "Nashville Skyline." The exhibition includes a manuscript for the song "Wanted Man" — which Mr. Cash sang on his 1969 album "At San Quentin" — with half of the lyrics in Mr. Dylan's handwriting and the rest in Mr. Cash's.

Neil Young's appearance on "The Johnny Cash Show" represented his first national television exposure. He returned to Nashville numerous times to record, including for his biggest album, "Harvest" (1972).

"They got my stuff down, and we did it," he once told the biographer Jimmy McDonough. "Just come in, go out — that's the way they do it in Nashville. There were no preconceptions." (The album also introduced Mr. Young to the pedal steel guitar player Ben Keith, who would remain a close collaborator for decades, until his death in 2010.)

This cross-pollination obviously represented a meeting of dramatically different cultures. The Nashville Cats were used to tightly organized sessions, often cranking out four complete songs in three hours. The rockers, who tended to work in a looser, more exploratory fashion, had previously associated the country sound with a bland, formulaic professionalism. Potentially more explosive was the perceived difference in political outlook at such a volatile time in American history. When the Byrds were invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry, they were booed because of their long hair.

"The polarization of the country was getting more and more extreme over the years we're looking at," Mr. Finney said.

JON LANGFORD/COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

"You had these extreme cultural differences, but then you had people overcoming those differences to make music together.

"In the summer of 1969, Joan Baez is singing antiwar songs at Woodstock, the queen of the counterculture," he said. "A week or two earlier, Jerry Reed was overdubbing guitar on 'Okie From Muskogee.' And just a few weeks later, they're in the studio making a Joan Baez record, and Jerry is all over it."

Mr. Daniels played down any sense of culture clash. "The level of respect by all involved was high and natural," he said. "It just happened and happened good."

After Paul McCartney spent six weeks in 1974 living and rehearsing in Nashville — "I've just heard so much about it that I wanted to see it for myself," he said at the time — and recording several songs, including the hit "Junior's Farm," the pipeline to Music City started to slow. By then, the sound had been integrated into so much of pop music, from California singer-songwriters to British rockers like Rod Stewart and Elton John, that it no longer required the Nashville Cats' touch. But this pioneering merger of rock 'n' roll freedom and country discipline has echoed through both genres, right up to contemporary bands like Mumford & Sons and the Avett Brothers.

"The studio is a common denominator," Mr. McCoy said. "They were proud to be there, and we were so excited they came."

'He changed what people thought of Nashville.'