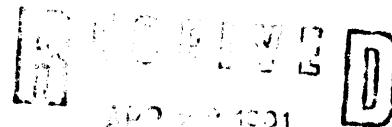


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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number 705 Grand Avenue N/A not for publication  
city, town Shreveport N/A vicinity  
state Louisiana code LA county Caddo code 017 zip code 71101

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ structures
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ objects
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:  
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Leslie P. Tassin April 17, 1991  
Signature of certifying official Leslie P. Tassin, LA SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism Date  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register. Entered on the National Register  
 See continuation sheet. 5/28/91

determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

for Signature of the Keeper Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

Moderne

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls brick

roof other: tar and gravel

other limestone

**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

The Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium (1929) is a five story civic center containing an auditorium, a ballroom, offices, and exhibition space. It is constructed of brick and limestone and features intensive Modernistic styling. The building has been altered very little since construction and even retains its original exterior and interior light fixtures.

The auditorium building follows the Rationalist tradition in that the entrance, office areas, exhibition space, seating area and fly gallery are all clearly articulated on the exterior. This gives the auditorium its lively, albeit fairly rigidly symmetrical, massing. The five door main entrance leads to a double framed, open beam lobby with stylized Egyptian doorways and arabesque panels. This gives way to an inner foyer with side halls leading to various ancillary spaces such as exhibit space, dressing rooms, etc. Beyond the foyer is the vast auditorium, which seats 3293 people in three tiers. There is also a dance floor and a large stage with stylized Mayan-looking bas relief panels at each corner of the rectangular proscenium. Other noteworthy interior decorative features include a skyscraper styled newel post, arabesque hanging pendant light fixtures, and various bas relief panels.

The exterior is a tour de force of intricately worked brick and carved limestone. Although the facade is of course the most elaborate, all elevations are richly detailed. Many of the copious corners and angles of the building are enlivened with vertical reeding formed by protruding brick corners. Protruding bricks are also used to create numerous luxuriant decorative bands and quoins. Limestone is used to accent the parapets, windows and principal entrances.

The central five bays of the facade have ornamentally carved limestone balconies and quoin piers which rise to a massive brick and limestone parapet. This parapet features alternating arabesque panels elaborately picked out and embellished with motifs too numerous to mention. The parapet culminates in a carved limestone frieze with a strong rhythmic pattern of exaggerated chevrons. The crowning auditorium space has its own parapet with nine bands of brick in an emphatic alternating chevron pattern. The building is so intensively ornamented that even the tiny spaces between the brackets supporting the balconies feature stylized motifs.

The central five bay portion of the facade is flanked by two massive bas relief eagles clutching stylized swords which hold limestone banners with inscriptions. One reads " The world must be made safe for democracy. Woodrow

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium, Shreveport, Caddo Parish, LA

Section number 7 Page 1

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Wilson" and the other, "The work of righteousness shall be peace. Isaiah 37:17." A central frieze bears the inscription "DEDICATED TO THOSE WHO SERVED IN THE WORLD WAR." These inscriptions bespeak the auditorium's dedicated purpose as a monument and memorial to the veterans of World War I.

Although the other three elevations are also well detailed, the rear is the most striking. The fly gallery features four massive piers with elaborate brickwork between them, including chevrons, bands of protruding bricks, and overlaid curvilinear brick moldings over the stage doors.

As noted previously, the building has been altered very little. A few of the offices have been modernized, a handicap access ramp has been installed, and the seats in the orchestra section have been replaced.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G N/A

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)  
architecture

Period of Significance  
1929

Significant Dates  
1929

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A

Significant Person  
N/A

Architect/Builder  
Architects: Jones, Roessle, Olschner & Wiener  
Builders: Ashton Glassell Co., Inc.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium is of state significance in the area of architecture as a very superior example of the Modernistic taste. This distinction is due to the amount, variety, and elaborateness of its brick and limestone detailing.

An important aspect of Modernistic architecture was the achievement of a modern look through the application of stylized decorative details to a traditional building form. The decorative motifs used were often derived from historical periods, but they were stylized beyond easy recognition. Thus it is often difficult to say whether a particular panel or bas relief is Mayan, classical, or Muslim. In any case, being Gothic, classical or Mayan per se was not the point. The point was to create an up-to-date, lively, and geometrically rich composition which could be applied to the requirements of a particular building design.

There are probably about fifty or so noteworthy Modernistic buildings in Louisiana (governmental buildings, large schools, major commercial buildings, etc.). Of these, the Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium is one of five or six examples which stand as landmarks of the style. It is one of the very largest, and, more importantly, it is one of the most intensively styled. While most examples feature ornamentation applied here and there, the exterior of the Shreveport Auditorium is almost all ornamentation, with hardly a square yard not treated in some way or other, on all elevations. From decorative brick bands and spandrel panels, to multiple chevrons, to limestone arabesque panels, to brick fluting, Modernistic ornamentation reaches a crescendo at the Shreveport Auditorium. It makes all but a very few examples in the state pallid by comparison.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Cornerstone, Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium.

Thomson, Bailey, editor. Historic Shreveport. Shreveport, LA: Shreveport Publishing Co., 1980.

- Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
  - previously listed in the National Register
  - previously determined eligible by the National Register
  - designated a National Historic Landmark
  - recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
  - recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property @ 2 acres

UTM References

A 

1	5
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4	2	9	3	0	0
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3	5	9	6	7	8	0
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Zone Easting Northing

B 

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--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Zone Easting Northing

C 

--	--

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--	--	--	--	--	--	--

D 

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Please refer to enclosed sketch map.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

Boundary lines follow property lines of parcel of land occupied by auditorium.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title National Register Staff

organization Division of Historic Preservation date March 1991

street & number P. O. Box 44247 telephone (504) 342-8160

city or town Baton Rouge state Louisiana zip code 70804

Owner: City of Shreveport  
P. O. Box 31109  
Shreveport, LA 71130

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

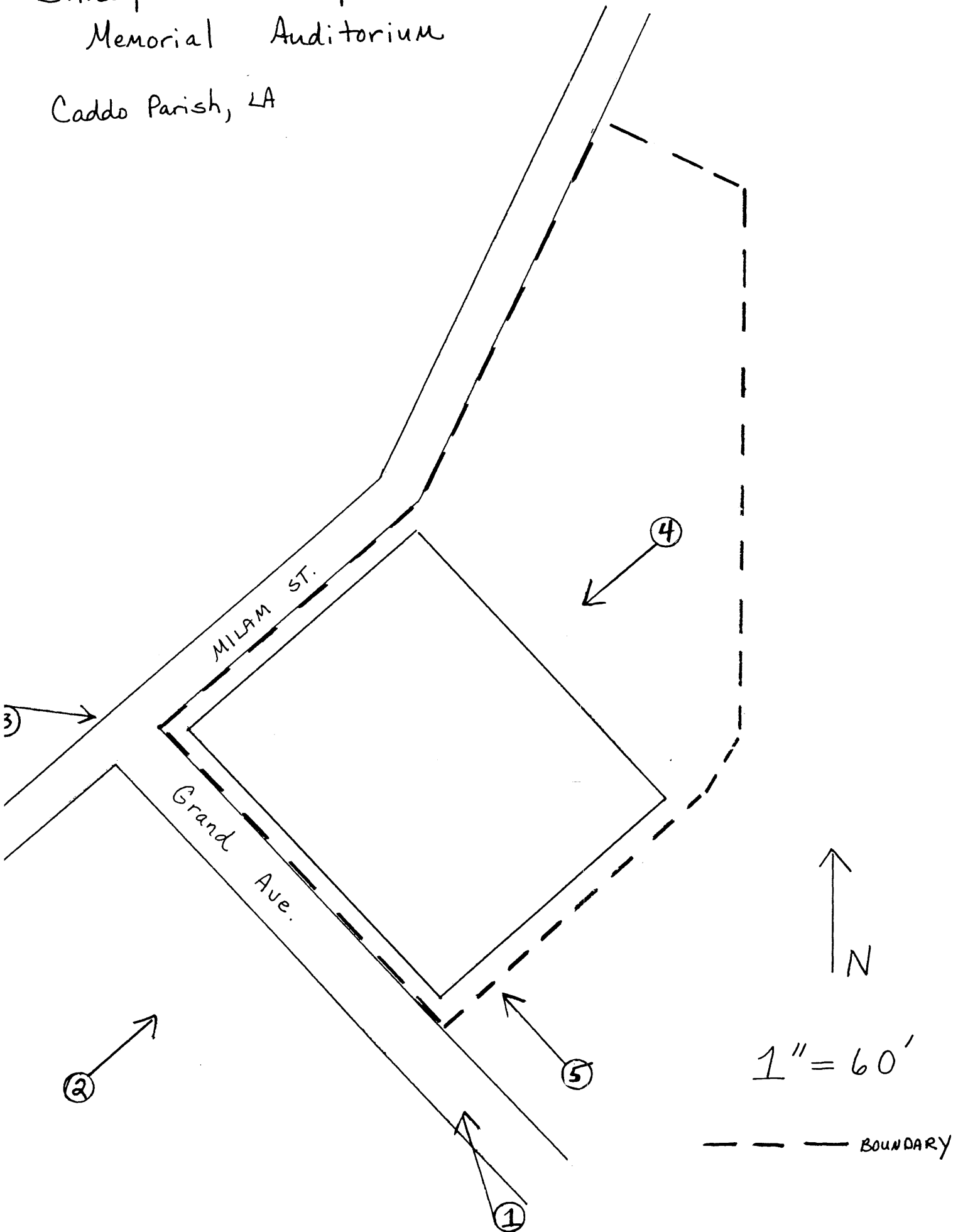
Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium, Shreveport, Caddo Parish, LA  
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Historical Note:

The Shreveport Municipal Auditorium, between 1948 and roughly 1960, was the home of the "Louisiana Hayride," a live musical program broadcast on radio. The Hayride featured stars such as Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, Slim Whitman, Webb Pierce, Faron Young, Jim Reeves, Sonny James and Johnny Horton. It was on the stage of the Hayride in 1954 that a young Memphis truck driver named Elvis Presley attracted national attention.

Shreveport Municipal  
Memorial Auditorium  
Caddo Parish, LA



# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

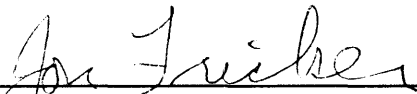
OMB No. 1024-0018

**Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium, Additional Documentation, Caddo Parish, LA** Page 1  
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium Additional Documentation Shreveport, Caddo Parish, LA

### Part 3 State Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally.

 3/21/06  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official Jonathan Fricker Date  
Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

Title

### Part 8

Applicable National Register Criteria: A  
Area of Significance: Performing Arts  
Period of Significance: 1948-1956

### State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The purpose of this submission is to upgrade the level of significance for the Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium to the national level and expand its area of significance to include Performing Arts. Constructed in 1929, the building originally achieved Register listing on May 28, 1991 in recognition of its state-level architectural significance as a superior example of the Modernistic taste. The expansions of area and level of significance are warranted because between 1948 and 1958 or 1960 (the exact ending date is unclear), the auditorium served as the home of the *Louisiana Hayride*. (However, the period of significance spans from 1948 to 1956, the current fifty year cutoff.) Known as the "Cradle of the Stars," the *Hayride* was a nationally influential, weekly country music radio program broadcast by station KWKH live from the Municipal's stage. The show earned its nickname because it repeatedly premiered talented singers who rose to stardom at the *Hayride* and then left for Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry*, considered the Mecca of country music. Historians have overlooked the *Hayride's* story until recently, but they now recognize that only the *Opry* surpasses it in importance.

More specifically, the *Hayride* is significant for these reasons:

1. The *Hayride* propelled Hank Williams, Sr. to stardom after giving him his first national exposure. Today, Williams is recognized as the father of contemporary country music.
2. The *Hayride* also introduced to a national audience and/or nurtured the careers of other performers who became country music megastars. The careers of Kitty Wells (known as the "Queen of Country Music") and Johnny Cash illustrate this role.
3. During its lifetime, the *Hayride* played a significant role in the evolution and popularization of country music.
4. The *Hayride* gave Elvis Presley his first national exposure, nurtured the singer as he learned his



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trade, and helped popularize his rockabilly style.

### Country Music: Its Background and Importance

As Bill C. Malone, the dean of country music historians, has explained, country music “defies precise definition, and no term (not even ‘country’) has ever successfully encapsulated its essence. It is a vigorous hybrid form of music, constantly changing and growing in complexity, just as the society in which it thrives also matures and evolves.” Nevertheless, a general understanding of country music is necessary to comprehend its importance. A review of where and how the music originated and evolved will help to create that understanding.

Country music’s distant ancestors were Celtic folksongs, ballads, and dance and fiddle tunes dating back to Elizabethan and pre-Elizabethan times. This music arrived in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, carried by English, Scottish and Irish immigrants who left the British Isles for a new life in the colonies. Once in America, musicians adapted the songs to their experiences by simplifying them, substituting new American words for British terms, writing new lyrics for old tunes, and writing new melodies and lyrics in the old style. Originally a part of each colony’s culture, this music remained popular in the South long after the pressures of industrialization and urbanization caused most residents of other regions to discard it. Reasons suggested for its preservation include the isolation of certain areas in the South, as well as the fact that many Southerners continued to believe in the old-time cultural values the music represented.

With the fiddle remaining the primary instrumentation (the guitar would not become generally available until the 1880s and 1890s), amateur Southern musicians continued to develop the traditional music in their care. Because white Southerners and African-Americans interacted so closely, indirectly and sometimes directly sharing musical ideas and styles, the latter’s music played an important part in this evolution. As the nineteenth century progressed and travel and information dissemination became easier, other valuable input came from outside sources. The sacred music tradition, for example, brought new hymns and singing styles to the South, where residents met periodically at local churches and courthouses to enjoy “singing conventions.” At the same time, the genteel songs of popular composers like Stephen Foster became available in sheet music form, and their lyrics appeared in newspapers and magazines. Traveling minstrel, medicine, showboat, and (at the end of the period) vaudeville shows introduced other types of popular (and sometimes rowdy) music. Whenever a Southern musician heard something he liked, he carried the song or singing style home to add to his repertoire and share with his neighbors. More sharing occurred as people moved from place to place within the South. When folklorists and “song collectors” began gathering material (then known variously as “old-time” music, “folk” tunes, “songs from Dixie,” “old southern tunes,” etc. and today called “roots” music) in the early twentieth century, they found a large cadre of traditional Southern sacred and secular music. It is this body of work that recording and radio industry entrepreneurs began disseminating as “hillbilly” music (see below) in the 1920s and 1930s.

According to Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, the first country music dealt with themes that seem old fashioned by today’s standards. It drew

its inspiration from Victorian culture. Innocent romance and sentiments of home, family, and religion predominated as country themes. Old-time country music mourned dead children; praised the Lord; revered Mother; waxed nostalgic for the good old days; pitied the poor; idealized rural life; preserved our folk music heritage; and venerated hearts-and-flowers love. [However,] World War II and its aftermath changed all of that forever. Country songwriters and performers faced the new, spiritually troubled times. . . .

by adding new subjects to their music. Ever since the war, historian Malone states, country songs have communicated the contradictions and tensions of modern life, exploring such “warring impulses” as religion vs. frolic, hedonism, and humor; home and family vs. infidelity (which Malone calls rambling); companionship vs. individualism; nostalgia vs. modernity; and politics.

With its many messages, country music has become the voice of the common man – the nation’s working class. It communicates his concerns and the realism of his experiences. As Malone explains, it

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expresses his "preoccupations with survival" and the uncertainties of life in an "often-indifferent world." Sometimes it provides a temporary escape through the fantasy in its lyrics. Although most of it still emerges from the South, "increasingly," the historian continues, "the message has resonated with those in other regions and from other backgrounds who, like their southern counterparts, have felt dwarfed by the complexities of a troublesome and uncertain future." Country music's audience is now not only national, but is international in scope. Whether in the United States or abroad, as legend Kitty Wells has explained, "country music relates to people because they think that what happened in the songs might have happened to them or to somebody they know." It is for these reasons that country music, and the *Louisiana Hayride's* contributions to it, are so important.

### The Rise of Country Music

The traditional music preserved in the South remained a local product until the phonograph reached America's middle class. When by 1920 the demand for recordings had depleted the supply of available music, the industry began a search for new material and markets. Okeh Records, one of the companies then producing and selling records, decided to establish sub-categories of music targeting specific groups and regions and began traveling the South looking for prospects. By mid-1921 company executive Ralph Peer had identified the first of these groups, "race" music (Peer's name), which featured the songs of black musicians and targeted the African-American audience.

Peer discovered his second target group (fans of old-time music) by accident. *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, edited by Patrick Carr, tells the story. While on a recording trip to Atlanta in 1923, as a favor to a scout who had brought other musicians to his attention, Peer

recorded a fifty-five year-old fiddler from Fannin County, Georgia, named Fiddlin' John Carson. On his record, Carson combined two of the most important nineteenth-century performing traditions: the solo fiddle and the vocal. He sang in a rough, untutored voice, and played the fiddle simultaneously. And his two selections reflected two song traditions: "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" was of course from the pop-vaudeville tradition, while the other side, "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow," was probably an old minstrel song that had gone into folk tradition. The record, in short, was a perfect symbol of the diverse strains of nineteenth-century music merging under the pressure of the new mass media.

When the record reached hit status by selling out its first pressing in 1924, Peer was stunned. He quickly realized he had stumbled upon a whole new market eager for access to traditional Southern music, a market he dubbed "hillbilly."

From this beginning, the commercialization of country music occurred quickly. Other companies began traveling the South in search of "hillbilly" artists. (Field recording would continue at least through 1933 and would include, in 1927, Peer's discovery of the Carter Family, called by some the most influential group in country music history.) Late 1924 saw the completion of the record industry's first catalogue of country music, issued by Columbia. Before long the genre produced its first superstar. A non-Southerner, Vernon Dalhart was a popular vocalist who discovered his talent for interpreting "old-time" music when his previous singing career sagged. Dalhart would record numerous country records under various names.

Hillbilly music definitely met the hopes of the record executives searching for profits. As musicologist Tracey E. W. Laird explains:

Between 1925 and 1929, the peak of phonograph sales before World War II, hillbilly releases grew from 225 to 1,250. Even during the Great Depression, when record sales dropped by 1933 to 7 percent of their 1929 levels, hillbilly records remained surprisingly resilient. At that time, when hillbilly music received little exposure on the radio networks, it remained a relatively viable entity on phonograph records.

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Despite the slowness of radio networks to pick up on the hillbilly phenomenon, local radio embraced country music almost from the start. Free radio programming became available in 1920 when Pittsburgh's KDKA aired the first commercial broadcast in the United States. By the end of 1922, the year when Atlanta's WBS began offering "old-time" music to its listeners, 89 of the over 500 stations in operation were located in the South. By 1930 over 600 stations existed; and despite the economic hardships of the Depression years, sales of radio receivers continued to rise. By 1938 over 80 percent of households in America had access to a radio. Even after the national networks began forming in the mid-1920s, local radio stations still had empty time slots to fill. They often gave these spots to "old-time" traditional music – a development that happened throughout the nation, not just in the South. The pattern was for live local performers to sing and play on short programs assigned to the very early morning hours (the only time, radio executives assumed, that rural audiences could listen). When the broadcasts proved popular, programmers gave them more advantageous schedules. The artists performed for free, their only reward the opportunity to announce their upcoming live performances. "By the 1930s," says Laird, "local radio broadcasts . . . became the prime venue for unsung hillbilly musicians to further their careers."

Early on local radio executives invented an additional way to showcase the music. In January 1923, Fort Worth's WBAP broadcast the first radio barn dance (definition below). Although WBAP's program was short-lived, the format, according to Patrick Carr, "was to become one of the most common in country music broadcasting." Chicago's WLS soon began a program which would run for nearly forty years and organize the first package tours to take country performers to the people. Nashville's WSM debuted a barn dance in 1925; it would not become known as the *Grand Ole Opry* until 1928. By 1932 both WLS and WSM had increased their power to 50 thousand watts, greatly extending their coverage areas. "By the end of the . . . 1930s," Carr asserts, "there were barn dances on both the East and West coasts of the nation," including shows in New York City and Hollywood! The networks eventually jumped on the barn dance bandwagon. Naming it the *National Barn Dance*, NBC picked up the Chicago program in 1933. Six years later it added part of the *Opry's* weekly broadcast to its lineup. Reflecting just how much the public enjoyed old-time music, the 1930s and 1940s also saw hundreds of large and small radio stations across the nation begin their own barn dances, also known as jamborees. Because of atmospheric conditions, the barn dances coming from stations with more powerful signals were sometimes heard thousands of miles from their points of origin.

Historian Carr provides a good explanation of the radio barn dance. It took the form of a variety program "that featured a sort of repertory company of different types of musicians; it was informal and unstructured, and the company of musicians was presented as one big happy family." In addition to its solo singers and brother and sister acts, the company usually included stereotypical characters like the country sweetheart and the hillbilly comic. The fare included all kinds of old-time music, "from barbershop quartets to Hawaiian bands to . . . sentimental songs;" but the most important focus of the early barn dance show was the fiddle or string band. By the end of the 1930s, however, this part of country music moved to the background as singing stars gained more popularity.

As Robert K. Oermann has pointed out, "The radio barn-dance era was a time of tremendous growth for the country-music industry." One year's figures tell the story. In 1936 *Radio Guide* magazine estimated that country music's barn-dance performers were a \$25 million business, stating that five thousand radio programs had featured hillbilly music in 1935. And country music's popularity continued to grow. World War II actually helped by providing broadcasts of traditional music to homesick soldiers and sailors, as well as by bringing together musicians from different parts of the country to share ideas. The golden age of the barn dance lasted well into the 1950s and saw the *Louisiana Hayride* become the nation's second most important and influential country music radio show.

### **KWKH and the Louisiana Hayride**

The *Louisiana Hayride* was the product of Shreveport AM radio station KWKH; and by the time of the *Hayride's* birth in 1948, KWKH was a 50 thousand watt country music powerhouse. Founded in 1922, the station became the sole property of wealthy and unconventional local businessman W. K. Henderson in 1924.

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Henderson purchased the call letters, so like his own initials, from a Georgia station; built a new and more powerful transmitter at his home outside Shreveport; and made the station his personal soapbox. Because the federal government had not yet regulated signal strengths, people as far away as Europe as well as local residents heard his eccentric complaints against retail chain stores, chain radio stations, and the United States Department of Commerce (later the Federal Radio Commission). Between Henderson's tirades the station aired music, entering the country arena big-time in late 1927 with the premiere of the *Jimmie Davis Show*. (As every Louisiana school child knows, Davis popularized the song, "You Are My Sunshine," and used that popularity -- as well as the KWKH transmitter -- as a stepping stone to two terms as the state's governor.) As music historian Tracey E. W. Laird has explained, Davis' weekly Friday evening show "inaugurated the station's future influence in country music" because it drew thousands of fan letters and taught other "hillbilly" performers the value of radio exposure. Throughout the 1930s the station aired the music of live country bands and singers, even after it joined a network and its ownership transferred to the company operating the Shreveport *Times*. Gradually, says Laird, KWKH "carved a regional niche of national significance" in country music.

Like the formats of numberless radio stations across America, KWKH's "hillbilly" programming included live early morning and noontime slots filled by an ever-changing cadre of entertainers. It also included two barn dance precursors to the *Louisiana Hayride*. In 1936, the weekly *Hillbilly Amateur Show* debuted. Broadcast on Sunday afternoons and hosted by Bob and Joe Shelton, two brothers known as "The Sunshine Boys," the live program routinely drew a larger audience than its City Hall Auditorium home could hold. In 1940 the *Saturday Night Roundup* replaced the Sunday program. It featured as many as twenty-five performers on any given Saturday night. However, World War II caused the cancellation of the *Roundup*, as the draft took many musicians and gas rationing restricted the rest. The station's professional staff was also impacted. When the musicians and radio staff returned to civilian life in 1945, KWKH's country music fans awaited them.

With the passage of more than fifty years, the memory of who actually suggested that KWKH start a new barn dance has become blurred. However, the stories of the various claimants are not as important as is the fact that, by working together, all contributed to the *Louisiana Hayride's* birth and success. Those who played pivotal roles included:

1. Dean Upson, the station's new commercial manager, who persuaded sponsors to underwrite the program and served as its first producer;
2. Horace Logan, the show's long-time master of ceremonies, who also assumed production duties when Upson left the station shortly after the show's debut;
3. the Bailes Brothers, a popular country singing group that performed on the *Hayride* and helped recruit talent in the early days; and
4. Henry Clay, the station manager with final authority to approve the concept. As time passed, he became more and more involved, says *Hayride* historian Stephen Tucker, in "maintaining and expanding a network of stations, overseeing labor contracts, [and] booking talent, . . . ."

Logan claimed to have chosen the show's name, which he admitted was not original. A 1930s Broadway song, a 1944 movie, and a 1941 book had each previously used *Louisiana Hayride* as its title. (The latter, by author Hammett T. Kane, was a history of Louisiana politics focusing upon the recently assassinated Huey P. Long.) However, Logan was aware of no rules prohibiting the "borrowing" of a title for a radio show. Since the words captured the program's focus and location in two succinct and catchy words, *Louisiana Hayride* the show became.

The stage and radio show premiered at 8:00 p.m. on April 3, 1948 in Shreveport's Municipal Memorial Auditorium, a venue capable of holding an audience of about 3,800. With the exception of a one-hour segment in which network obligations took precedent, KWKH broadcast the entire three-hour show. (The network conflict would soon be resolved.) The inaugural performers included the Bailes Brothers; the Four Deacons; Johnny and Jack and the Tennessee Mountain Boys, with Miss Kitty Wells; Curley Kinsey and the Tennessee Ridge Runners;

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Harmie Smith and the Ozark Mountaineers; Pappy Covington's band; the Mercer Brothers; and Tex Grimsley and the Texas Playboys.

As far as the radio and Municipal Auditorium audiences were concerned, the show was an immediate smash. Musicologist Laird has devoted an entire chapter of her book, *Louisiana Hayride: Radio and Roots Music Along the Red River*, to the question of why Shreveport was positioned to nurture and support the *Hayride* at this time. She concludes that it happened because culture (in this case country culture) follows commerce. Located on the Red River in the northwest corner of Louisiana, early Shreveport was a river port with a large territory spreading into East Texas, Southern Arkansas, and (claims Laird) even Southeast Oklahoma. (Today the region surrounding the city is called the Ark-La-Tex.) The town was also a strategic point on the overland trail to Texas, and by the end of the nineteenth century would be a significant railroad hub. In Shreveport, the cultures of the Deep South and frontier West met head on. The South, in the form of agriculture and the cotton boll, came to dominate; but the wild side of frontier life was never far from the surface. Thus, says Laird, people from different backgrounds "interacted across borders of race and power at a mid-nineteenth-century cultural crossroads, and the inevitable tensions of contact, both positive and negative, lent a singular character to . . . [the] region." And, she continues, "A direct connection exists between the spirit and energy of the *Louisiana Hayride* and the character of the place . . ." Musically, that character was fed by the same sources that contributed to the development of traditional old-time music in other parts of the South – sacred songs, the steamboat, the minstrel show, etc. However, according to Laird, in Shreveport it also drew from the rowdy entertainment tradition of the town's red light district. The result of this mixture, says Louisiana Public Broadcasting in a video chronicling the *Hayride*, was a "chemistry of music unique to the area."

Other commentators have focused upon different reasons to explain why the *Hayride* developed and succeeded in Shreveport. For example, Stephen Tucker, another *Hayride* historian, reminds us that in the immediate post-war years "the entire North Louisiana-East Texas region was experiencing an economic upsurge that was tied to the area's expanding oil and gas industry." This meant that most people had extra money for entertainment; and at 60 cents for adults and 30 cents for children, *Hayride* tickets were a bargain. In addition, the prosperity brought new residents to town, and many were former rural dwellers reluctant to abandon their old culture. Shreveport's lack of a television station in 1948 was another reason for the *Hayride*'s popularity, for there was nothing else to do on a Saturday night. Of course, credit must be given to KWKH, which over the years had made itself a force in country music. The station had the facilities, including a 50 thousand watt clear broadcast channel that could send its signal all the way to the Pacific coast at night, and reputation to produce the show. It also had a staff that Tucker has described as "flexible, ambitious, and totally professional." In addition, this staff was innovative and willing to take a chance on performers whose styles were different from the norm. At the very beginning, they were fortunate to have access to excellent local talent available at low cost. And as author K. D. Hobgood points out, the station's staff proved to be gifted at "recognizing young talent." Finally, one must acknowledge that the growing popularity of country music itself contributed to the *Hayride*'s success.

Whatever the reasons, the *Hayride*'s popularity and audience quickly spread. Just five months after the premiere, a local magazine reported that Shreveport was "becoming the folk music center of the Southwest." Fans returned to the Municipal Auditorium every week, many of them coming from East Texas and southern Arkansas as well as metropolitan Shreveport and western Louisiana.

The shows those fans saw and others heard over the airwaves were what program engineer Bob Sullivan called "happenings." For example, performers arrived dressed as they planned to appear on stage. "There was no rehearsal," Sullivan recalled, "everybody just showed up." The audience was so relaxed that the auditorium seemed to have something of a carnival atmosphere. As Hi Roberts, one of the *Hayride*'s several announcers, explained, the audience felt and acted like the *Hayride*'s family. People freely roamed the aisles, where friends and family members greeted one another and promoters hawked free autographed photos of their client performers. Meanwhile, amateur photographers took their own pictures. Interspersed between performances, audience participation contests also contributed to the fun. For these reasons, the *Hayride* seemed casual, friendly, and chatty to observers.

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Yet this relaxed atmosphere belied the organizational efforts of producer Horace Logan, who carefully structured the program for maximum entertainment excitement and impact. For those in the live audience, the evening started with a short pre-show warm-up designed to get them involved. Logan would pose a series of questions, the last of which was always, "Is there anybody here from the great state of Texas?" A large Texas contingent always made up part of the live audience, and they always responded with loud shouts. These cheers, picked up by microphones Logan had ordered placed within the audience, were the first sound the radio listeners heard each week. Next came the show's theme song, sung by the entire cast assembled before the show's painted backdrop: "Come along, everybody come along, while the moon is shining bright," they sang, "We're going to have a wonderful time at the Louisiana Hayride tonight." An instrumental piece played by one of the Hayride's two house bands followed the theme. Then performances by established cast members and new acts began.

Logan broke the three-hour program into hour or half-hour segments (the length seems to have varied over time) hosted by multiple masters of ceremonies. In addition to providing for variety in announcers, the producer constructed each segment to showcase a variety of acts. That way the show did not force artists to directly compete and the variety kept the audience interested. The result, as Stephen Tucker explains, was "a rich mixture of gospel music, sentimental or 'heart' songs, pop tunes, contemporary country hits, honky-tonk weepers, bluegrass tunes, comedy and novelty numbers, and folk music." To keep the show moving at a lively pace, Logan allowed each act to present only two numbers but allowed the artists to choose what those songs would be. If the audience showed its approval by cheering loudly enough, he allowed the act to present another two songs during an encore later in the show. The most popular artists received invitations to return the next week. Thus, each singer or band had to perform at its best each time it took the stage. The *Hayride* offered one-year contracts to those who repeatedly proved their worth.

While Logan usually assumed responsibility for choosing *Hayride* performers, station manager Henry Clay worked to build a regional network to augment KWKH's powerful 50 thousand watt signal. His efforts reached fruition in February 1950 with the organization of the *Louisiana Hayride Network*. Although its membership was fluid, at its largest the network consisted of 27 stations distributed throughout Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. At least one of the network members, KWKH's sister station in Little Rock, also broadcast at 50 thousand watts. Thus, *Hayride* music was heard from Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to Canada and, according to KWKH officials, the program drew fan mail "from practically every state in the Union." With the exception of KWKH and the Little Rock station (both of which carried the entire program), the network affiliates carried only the first thirty minutes of the show. Taped transcriptions of previous programs also aired on some stations. The practice of airing shortened versions continued when national network ties finally materialized. In early 1953 CBS began an hour long, weekly country music showcase called *Saturday Night --- Country Style*. According to Logan, it featured "six country music shows scattered across the country from West Virginia to Texas. The *Hayride* was one of the six and . . . [was] heard in a thirty-minute segment every third Saturday over the network, coast-to-coast." The following year the Armed Forces Radio Network picked up a weekly thirty-minute segment. The various network affiliations brought the *Louisiana Hayride* and its performers to millions of listeners.

### The Cradle of the Stars

It only took the premiere broadcast for Shreveport and a spot on the *Hayride* to become the intermediate goal for aspiring country musicians. Within less than a year the program was known as the "Cradle of the Stars." Observers have since called it a "springboard," "launching pad," "artist's hothouse," "proving ground," "stepping stone," and star maker." The *Hayride* deserves all these names because it introduced, promoted and nurtured a phenomenal number of high caliber performers, writers and artists who went on to become headliners at Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry* and national celebrities in country music circles.

The *Hayride* helped ambitious performers in four ways. First, it recognized their talent and, with its acceptance of innovation and willingness to take a chance, gave both conventional and unconventional new singers the opportunity to perform. Second, it provided a nurturing platform where

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future stars could learn to read an audience, perfect their styles, and gain confidence in their performing skills. Third, the program gave struggling newcomers a modicum of economic security in a difficult business. The weekly Saturday programs gave them an income they could count on and left them free to book other shows during the week. *Hayride* package tours (those in which a group of *Hayride* performers traveled and performed together in towns throughout KWKH's listening area) also provided income. Fourth, and most importantly, the *Hayride* provided national exposure for singers usually unknown outside the confines of their hometowns or counties. That exposure resulted from KWKH's powerful signal and the *Hayride's* dissemination via its regional and later national network (the latter equaling 200 stations). Many times the exposure garnered up-and-coming stars invitations to appear on the *Grand Ole Opry*. For this reason, some observers (then and now) have called the *Hayride* the *Opry's* "minor-league farm club," but it was much more. As the careers of three *Hayride* alumni and country music megastars – Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, and Johnny Cash – illustrate and prove, the *Louisiana Hayride* was a star maker.

### Hank Williams

Whether outside observers originally dubbed the *Louisiana Hayride* the "Cradle of the Stars" or *Hayride* officials coined the label in response to their first star's departure for Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry* is a bit unclear. Whoever invented the phrase, its first use came after the *Hayride* made Hank Williams country music's first post-war superstar. Stories conflict concerning how the Alabama singer obtained a spot on the program. The important fact is that he came and, for a while, the *Hayride's* and Hank's stories became one.

Although Williams had sung in Alabama for several years, he was little known outside that state when he came to Shreveport determined to appear on the *Hayride*. According to the *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, his early songs were considered "anachronistic;" and according to program producer Horace Logan, his records had gone unsold. Williams definitely needed the *Hayride*, and although program officials did not realize it, they needed Williams. The four-month-old *Hayride* already ranked as a popular local and regional radio program, but it lacked the spark – a star -- needed to raise it to greatness. Williams would provide that spark.

The singer debuted on August 7, 1948. He quickly gained the audience's approval, receiving an ovation and earning an encore on his first night. According to *Hayride* historian Stephen Tucker, "No one . . . had [ever had] such an electrifying impact on the show, at least until another darkly handsome . . . singer from Mississippi came along." Williams continued to perform on *Hayride* Saturday nights and also began hosting a KWKH morning show, the "Johnny Fair Syrup Hour." He also booked weeknight performances at schools and nightclubs in the Ark-La-Tex region. The local and network radio exposure brought him fans from everywhere. However, the pivotal event occurred at one fall *Hayride* performance when he sang an old Tin Pan Alley song called "Lovesick Blues." The audience loved it. However, Williams' record producer, Fred Rose, disliked the song. Musicologist Tracey Laird speculates that it was the confidence the singer gained from performing "Lovesick Blues" repeatedly at the *Hayride* which gave him the courage to trust his instincts and record the number. "Lovesick Blues," remembers Horace Logan, propelled Williams "straight to the top of the country music world" and on to the *Grand Ole Opry*. Thus, as Stephen Tucker concludes, "Hank Williams quickly established himself as the *Hayride's* first legitimate solo star and in the process established the program as a major launching pad for the best new talent in the country."

Today, according to music critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine, many observers consider Hank Williams, who died tragically at age twenty-nine, to be "the defining figure of country music." The Country Music Hall of Fame confirmed this view by making him one of its first three inductees in 1961. His popularity and influence endure because he wrote and recorded now-classic songs with emotional lyrics that defined his era. Furthermore, says Erlewine, he "established the rules for all the country performers who followed him," and many claim him as an inspiration. As late as 1999 a boxed set of Williams' music in compact disk form scored two Grammy Awards. Country music would certainly be very different today were it not for the career of Hank Williams.



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Hank Williams, Jr., himself a country music star, is emphatic in his praise for the *Louisiana Hayride* and the role it played in his father's career. Says Williams, "The *Hayride* was a star maker. It built hundreds of careers in country music – more than any other show of its kind. All told, it produced about two dozen of the [twentieth] century's premier country music artists. My daddy was the first of these. . . ."

As historian Laird explains,

Williams' initial ten-month-long *Hayride* stint [he would return to the show briefly before his untimely death] . . . effectively set a pattern followed by many future country music luminaries: he came to Shreveport, won an enthusiastic regional following, honed his performance style through radio shows and numerous personal appearances, released one or two records that sold well and gained national attention, and shortly thereafter, left for Nashville.

Instead of bemoaning Williams' loss, *Hayride* officials concentrated on finding new stars. Their instincts, especially those of program producer Horace Logan, for recognizing innovation and talent brought other future country music legends, including Kitty Wells and Johnny Cash, to the *Hayride* stage.

## Kitty Wells

As previously mentioned, future superstar Kitty Wells (Ellen Muriel Deason Wright) participated in the *Hayride's* premiere broadcast in 1948. However, her role was not that of star. She worked as the "girl singer" and one of the background vocalists in the group known as Johnny and Jack and the Tennessee Mountain Boys. Johnny was Johnny Wright, Wells' husband. Johnny and Jack had worked together before World War II and reunited when that conflict ended. Like other groups trying to survive in country music in the post-war era, they bounced from one radio station and barn dance to another. The mother of three children, Kitty apparently performed only when she was needed. For example, Johnny and Jack played the *Grand Old Opry* before coming to Shreveport, but Kitty rarely performed with them.

When the group relocated to Louisiana in early 1948, Wells took a more active role. For a time, historian Tracey Laird relates, she worked as a disk jockey "known as the 'Little Rag Doll' for the quilt pieces she sold during a daily half-hour radio program." Johnny and Jack regularly featured her on their own KWKH radio shows as well as in their *Hayride* appearances. The group left Shreveport in 1950 but soon returned to the city and its barn dance, where Wells continued to sing. Advertisements in the June 1951 Shreveport *Times* clearly list her as a performer in her own right, separate from Johnny and Jack, who are also listed. Thus, she continued to gain experience while learning that a woman could be a legitimate, independent attraction in the then male-dominated country music business.

Johnny, Jack and Kitty again left the *Hayride* in 1952, returning to the *Opry*. Shortly thereafter, Wells recorded her first hit record, "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." (Her previous recordings had been unsuccessful.) The song was a smash; and Wells became a sensation. Because she was the first woman to achieve solo popularity in country music, she soon earned the title "Queen of Country Music," and her later accomplishments vindicate the label. Over the years she charted 81 hits, 23 of which reached the Top Ten. According to the Country Music Museum's files, she was voted *Billboard's* number one female country artist for eleven straight years, and other trade magazines awarded her similar titles between 1952 and 1965. In 1968 she hosted her own syndicated television show. 1976 saw her election to the Country Music Hall of Fame, while 1986 brought her the Pioneer Award from the Academy of Country Music. Finally, in 1991 she received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Even more important than these accomplishments, however, is the fact that Wells destroyed the barriers keeping female performers in the background of country music and, thus, paved the way for the careers of later legends like Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton.

Although Wells' breakthrough occurred outside the *Louisiana Hayride's* stage, there can be no doubt that her time on the program and at KWKH assisted her career. While singing in Shreveport and environs, she sustained her craft, gained confidence, and most importantly, remained in show business at a time when, most authors agree, she



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wished to retire to stay at home with her children. As Tillman Franks, a Shreveport country music musician, manager, and producer active throughout the *Hayride* years, has commented, Wells “cut her eyeteeth on the *Hayride* and KWKH.”

## **Johnny Cash**

Johnny Cash played his first *Hayride* show in 1955 and remained until July 1956. A recently signed recording artist with very little live performance experience under his belt, Cash was a bundle of raw talent ready for molding. His experience working the *Hayride* and other Ark-La-Tex venues did just that, refining his style and building his confidence. Like Williams, he would leave the *Hayride* for Nashville and, as Horace Logan confirms, go on to “attain worldwide fame as one of the most exciting, innovative, and durable performers of the next forty years.”

Cash in later years shared his memories of his *Hayride* debut, which came “at a time when I probably couldn’t have gotten a shot at a national audience anywhere else.”

When I was first invited to appear on the *Louisiana Hayride*, very few people outside the Memphis, Tennessee, area had ever heard of Johnny Cash, much less heard me sing. I’ll never forget how excited I was as I stepped up to the microphone on the stage of Shreveport’s Municipal Auditorium that Saturday night in 1955. Besides the live audience of thirty-eight hundred people out beyond the footlights, I knew that thousands of radio listeners across the whole country were about to hear my voice for the first time.

It made this old Arkansas farmboy mighty nervous, I can tell you. The biggest audience I’d played for up to then had been maybe two or three hundred folks, and the idea of performing for so many people all at once filled my stomach with butterflies.

But when I finished my first number and heard the cheers and applause from the crowd out front, it made those butterflies go away and gave me the greatest feeling anybody could imagine. I’ve had many unforgettable moments in my career since then, but that first night on the *Louisiana Hayride* has always been in a class by itself.

“The nationwide exposure I got on the *Hayride*, via the CBS Radio Network,” Cash concluded, “was the key factor in making my early records successful.”

## **The *Hayride*’s Influence on Country Music**

As previously explained, country music evolved from the body of traditional songs preserved by Americans, and especially Southerners, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This music continued to evolve, or change, after its “discovery” by recording company executive Ralph Peer in 1923. As the stories of Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, and Johnny Cash hint and country music historians confirm, the *Louisiana Hayride* played a major role in the music’s continuing evolution and its increasing popularity in the years following World War II. According to Hank Williams, Jr., “The *Hayride* . . . did a lot to refine and redefine what was then called ‘hillbilly’ music and make it a respected part of America’s musical culture. It helped make it possible for country artists like my daddy to break out of the narrow ‘hillbilly’ category and cross over into the mainstream of popular music.” All observers agree that only Nashville’s *Grand Old Opry* surpassed the *Hayride* in importance and influence during the post-war period.

Two related factors – innovation and broadcast range – enabled the *Hayride* to impact the direction of country music and increase the music’s popularity. In his memoir of his *Hayride* years, program producer Horace Logan explained the show’s programming philosophy. “We didn’t have any qualms about experimenting,” he said. “If we saw a trend emerging, we tried to make the most of it – and we didn’t mind starting some new trends, either.” Historians agree with Logan. Says Stephen Tucker, the *Hayride* was “easily the most experimental and innovative major country radio show” between 1948 and 1958 or 1960 (see below). According to Tracey Laird, *Hayride* officials “were . . . more ready than most to take chances. Artists whose styles did not easily fit into increasingly discrete musical categories, artists who would have been rebuffed by the self-consciously traditional

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*Opry*, found a welcome at KWKH.” And she continues, “They kept an entrepreneurial eye out for new talent and an ear to the ground for changes in what people might like to hear and when they would like to hear it.”

Of course, the show's large broadcast range, consisting of at least two, 50 thousand watt transmitters (those belonging to KWKH and its Arkansas sister station), as well as the coverage provided by the program's regional and national network affiliations, sent the *Hayride's* musical discoveries to millions of listeners nationwide. As a result of the show's coverage and its innovation, says Stephen Tucker, “A seemingly endless flow of talent came to Shreveport, so many stars that to chart their careers is to virtually trace the development of country music after World War II.” Michael Streissguth agrees, saying that the “men who would help define the country sound of the 1950s crowded the Municipal Auditorium stage almost every Saturday night.” Because the *Grand Ole Opry* focused upon proven talent and very rarely invited newcomers without hit records to its stage (Elvis Presley was an exception), these trendsetters were almost always heard first on the *Louisiana Hayride*.

## Elvis Presley and Rockabilly Music

Elvis Presley's October 1954 introduction to a national audience, says musicologist Tracey Laird, “stands as a pivot point where the natural extension of a long [country music] tradition made a sudden abrupt shift toward a new musical paradigm.” According to author K. D. Hobgood, the night is “considered the beginning of a new era, one tied with rock ‘n’ roll.” There can be no doubt that Elvis fundamentally altered the future of popular music and culture in America, and he began the process at the *Louisiana Hayride*.

Innovative and willing to take a chance on new entertainment approaches, the *Hayride* provided the perfect venue for Presley. People tend to forget that his musical roots were grounded in the country sound, and he considered himself a country singer -- the “Hillbilly Cat” -- when he came to Shreveport. He had already played to good crowds in Memphis, his hometown, and even had an appearance at the *Grand Ole Opry* under his belt. Observers now disagree upon how to interpret the results of that Nashville appearance (which took place during a portion of the show not broadcast nationally) and its impact on the singer. Some say the audience's polite but cool reception discouraged him; but Peter Guralnick, a major Presley biographer, insists the experience was positive. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Presley's emerging style did not fit the *Opry*; and its audience did not know how to react to him.

People's memories of how Presley obtained his first *Hayride* slot conflict, with many taking credit. The most popular version of the story is that he served as a substitute for another group wishing to be released from its *Hayride* obligation so it could earn more money at a different appearance. Whatever the reason, Elvis got the call.

The story of that first performance is legendary. First, announcer Frank Page introduced Elvis, who was so nervous he kept interrupting the master of ceremonies. Says Page, when Elvis

started singing, he sorta rocked forward on his feet and looked like he was about to leap right out into the audience. He shook his legs just a bit but I believe that was nerves more than anything else. All in all, I'd say he showed restraint before the crowd of mostly older, married couples. He seemed at times pinned in, like he was struggling to contain this enormous kinetic force. It slipped out a little there at the end and, to my surprise, the audience seemed to connect with and even appreciate what Elvis was doing.

Despite Page's assertion to the contrary, Presley's unconventional music initially stunned the majority of the *Hayride's* audience. Guralnick says Page and producer Horace Logan had to encourage the crowd to cheer. At first discouraged, Elvis regrouped backstage and tried again during the second half of the show. This time he clicked and, as Tillman Franks comments, “The roof caved in. He was on his way.”

*Hayride* management quickly offered Presley a standard one-year's contract, which his parents signed for the underage singer. After signing, he quit his Memphis truck-driving job and committed himself to music.

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Like those who had come before and those who would come after his time on the *Hayride*, he began spending Saturday nights singing at the Municipal Auditorium and booking weeknight performances at other Tennessee and Ark-La-Tex venues. A year later he gladly extended his contract.

According to *Hayride* historian Stephen Tucker, "The approximately sixteen months that Elvis spent on the *Hayride* proved invaluable to his career." Working the *Hayride* built his confidence. Continues Tucker, it gave him the "freedom to perfect a performance style, a repertoire, and an image which were all controversial." The local and national exposure he gained through personal appearances and national radio broadcasts began to build the devoted fan base that would last throughout his life. While performing on the Municipal stage, he met drummer D. J. Fontana, who would accompany him for many years. And while in Shreveport he obtained a new manager. Colonel Tom Parker had heard about the new phenomenon through the show business grapevine but first saw and heard the entertainer at the *Louisiana Hayride*. Parker won Elvis' confidence, signed him, and then ended his *Hayride* career by buying out the second half of his contract. Under his new manager's guidance, Presley became an international music and movie superstar. After one last charity concert, he never returned to the *Louisiana Hayride*.

Elvis' months on the *Hayride* did more than help create another superstar. They helped to popularize a new type of music – rockabilly. The layman attempting to understand rockabilly finds its definition to be difficult, contentious, and individual. The word comes from combining two terms – hillbilly (as in the old name for country music) and rock 'n' roll – and points to the music's origin in the country tradition. Thus, simplified definitions like "hillbilly rock 'n' roll" or "rock 'n' roll performed by a country singer or in a country style" tell part of the story but leave out important information. As the *Encyclopedia of Country Music* explains, rockabilly was also the "intermingling of southern black and white music traditions." Musician Carl Perkins calls it "a country man's song with a black man's rhythm." Rockabilly, says music historian Tracey Laird, reflected the "tempestuous social changes taking place in America's race relations in the 1950s." Presley's "stage persona and his music conveyed a rebellion of manners through an intuitive blend of black and white styles."

Elvis and the rockabilly musicians who followed him at the *Louisiana Hayride* and elsewhere specifically aimed this assertive, fast, emotionally intense, and rhythmic music at youth, an audience previously ignored by the music industry. As Craig Morrison explains in *Go Cat Go! Rockabilly Music and Its Makers*, rockabilly song lyrics sang of "fast living, cars, parties, unusual characters, male-female relationships, and teenage fashions and frustrations." They found an eager audience in 1950s kids described by Laird as striving for "new means of expression – in dress, attitude, patois, and soundtrack -- that would distinguish . . . [them] from the world of adults."

### The Hayride's Decline

Although Elvis Presley was a difficult act to follow, the *Hayride* continued for a while to attract talented and ambitious singers and turn them into stars. Johnny Cash, for example, played the *Hayride* during and after Presley's tenure, as did Jim Reeves and Johnny Horton. George Jones is one of the future stars who played the venue after Elvis left. However, Presley set changes in motion, and those changes did not bode well for the program's future. Before Elvis, the show's Municipal Auditorium audiences consisted of adults, often accompanied by their children, who loved and expected to hear traditional country music. But even on the first night of Presley's sixteen-month *Hayride* career, according to Tillman Franks (who was there), that audience began to shift to the teenage set. As word of Presley's appeal spread throughout the Ark-La-Tex, each week more teens, both boys and girls, packed the building. David Kent, an observer who would later become associated with attempts to revive the cancelled program, described the new audience as "squealing at the top of their lungs, storming the stage and raising a hoorah that was entirely un-Country-Western-like. . . ." They literally squeezed the older, more traditional fans out. After Presley's departure, other *Hayride* singers began to imitate him and the rockabilly sound, with the result that mainstream country acts sometimes found themselves pushed aside. Partly as a result of these factors, the older country fans failed to return to the *Hayride*.

Of course, the *Hayride's* decline and eventual end cannot be blamed solely on Presley, rockabilly music,

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and the temporary decrease in country music's popularity which they caused. Music and *Hayride* historians have identified several other factors that also contributed to the end. These include:

1. completion of the nation's transformation from a rural to an urban and industrial character.
2. Shreveport's lack of recording studios, booking agencies, and music publishing companies, i.e., related businesses needed to support the music industry. Nashville developed these enterprises, but short-sighted Shreveport businessmen, especially those with the *Hayride*'s and KWKH's parent company, declined to do so.
3. the loss of the *Hayride*'s place on CBS's national radio network, which had occurred by 1958. This development probably resulted from changes in radio format, for throughout the 1950s local disk jockeys playing recorded music replaced network programming and live musical broadcasts.
4. competition from television's free programming, which finally arrived in Shreveport in 1953.
5. competition from sports, especially Saturday college football games, which lured fans to stadiums and glued others to their television sets.
6. rising production costs, which included talent fees and facility rentals. Station manager Henry Clay blamed this problem when asked why KWKH cancelled the *Hayride*.

As a result of all these forces, the *Louisiana Hayride* began to decline. Information concerning the exact date of its demise is contradictory, a problem possibly attributed to the fact that KWKH replaced its weekly broadcasts with twice monthly, then monthly presentations before pulling the plug. November 1958 and August 27, 1960 both appear in country music histories as the closing date. Its end, said one fan was "just like a death of a type. It was a big chunk out of our lives." However, the program did not completely disappear; for according to former producer Horace Logan, KWKH continued to circulate and play tapes of previous shows for years. Attempts have been made by country music entrepreneurs to revive the show, but so far none has succeeded.

## The *Louisiana Hayride*'s Legacy

Today the *Louisiana Hayride* is considered legendary. As *Hayride* historian Stephen Tucker maintains, the show "remains one of country music's most revered institutions," with "a devoted and loyal following that has endured to the present day." No other musical show (not even the *Grand Ole Opry*) can match the *Hayride*'s achievement of having introduced, from the same stage, both the father of contemporary country music (Hank Williams, Sr.) and rock 'n roll's first and most definitive musical icon (Elvis Presley) to a national audience. Had the *Hayride* only debuted these two singers, it would rank as a nationally significant institution. Yet the *Hayride* did that and much more. It introduced and/or nurtured the careers of at least twenty-three major country music stars now included in the Country Music Hall of Fame. In addition to Kitty Wells and Johnny Cash, these include Slim Whitman, Webb Pierce, Jim Reeves, Faron Young, George Jones, Johnny Horton, and others – stars not discussed in this narrative but nevertheless very important in the post World War II development of country music. Finally, the show left a body of work including 550 Saturday night broadcasts of the best country music available at the time. For all of these reasons, there can be no doubt that the Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium, home of the *Louisiana Hayride* and the building with which the *Hayride* is directly associated, is nationally significant in the area of performing arts.

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