

BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Nashville Live

by Horace Sutton

A TRADE MAGAZINE that occupies itself with the world of innkeeping came down to Nashville recently to work up a story on the new Opryland Hotel, a sanctuary for travelers that opened last fall within the shadow of the new Grand Ole Opry, and that musical version of Luna Park called Opryland, U.S.A. The editors took one eye-rupturing look at this 614-room extravaganza, with its Olympic-size swimming pool, its six lighted tennis courts, its skylighted shopping gallery, and its 56 suites, and posed a penetrating

Grand Ole Opry is the oldest continuous radio program in the country. Long ago it moved out of WSM's radio studios, and for a time it moved into a variety of tabernacles and theaters. Many followers will remember the Ryman Auditorium in downtown Nashville, which was *Grand Ole Opry's* home until a handsome slope-roof, brick-style Opry House was built for it along sleek modern lines. The new Opry House, with its incongruous name, considering its rakish looks, opened in March of 1974, establishing the centerpiece of the complex that



Onstage at the Grand Ole Opry—"Not a dry eye anywhere."

question that must come to the mind of anyone who turns into the elegant porte cochere of this many-columned, many-bricked complex.

"This Is Country?" asked the magazine's headline. It was a fair question, considering that all this grandeur grew out of some twanging and fiddling that began 53 years ago. It was on a late November day in 1925 that a fiddler named Jimmy Thompson jiggled his bow over the strings of his violin, sending the sounds of the first *WSM Barn Dance* into the microphones of the WSM studio at Nashville's National Life and Accident Insurance Company.

It took several years before an ad lib that went out over the air was to give Nashville's prime industry its indelible name. NBC had been broadcasting classical music interspersed with solemn incantations by Walter Damrosch. The *WSM Barn Dance* followed Damrosch and his longhair music. The Nashville announcer said, "For the last hour, you have been listening to grand opera. Now we will present Grand Ole Opry." It was country, and it was corny, and it stuck forever.

would ultimately include Opryland U.S.A., a 217-acre amusement and entertainment park; the *Grand Ole Opry* radio show; the Opry House (called the largest broadcast and television studio and auditorium in the world); Grand Ole Opry Tours (visits to homes of the country music stars and other cultural landmarks); and Opryland Hotel.

The Opryland, which put the cap on this spreading industry that a little fiddle scratching started, is the largest convention hotel in Tennessee. Pictures of Jackson, Polk, and Andrew Johnson—Tennessee's presidents—adorn its walls. Equally as impressive, from the presidential suite, with its spiral staircase, red carpet, and piano, is the view of the home of Roy Acuff, the shahinshah of country music, known for "The Wabash Cannonball" and "The Great Speckled Bird."

At the hotel, guests assemble on the bare wood floor—no sawdust—of The Saloon to sip whiskey, retire to the Old Hickory for fine dining, to Rachel's Kitchen for grits, eggs, and coffee, or in good weather to the Veranda, an outdoor restaurant where groups play

music in the gazebos. The Stagedoor Lounge is a show bar of the sort Las Vegas hasn't seen, with the customers distributed on seven tiers that rise two stories high overlooking the stage.

Upstairs, the guest rooms are equipped with seven-foot-long beds, each with its own electric blanket. A panelboard that can be operated by any normal person with two years of engineering school education has systems for a self-programming wake-up system, a signal for early maid service, emergency message signals, and two channels of music, one country.

Despite these grand amenities, which perhaps led the trade publication to ask, "This Is Country?", the designers of the Opryland Hotel insist that the style they chose is modeled after middle Tennessee homes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By that, I think they mean that after all those glass towers with glass elevators that have risen across the nation, theirs is a design that is southern and traditional and never shouts out loud.

Opryland Hotel functions as a storehouse for those who come to play in Opryland U.S.A., a big, upbeat park that fairly quivers with music. Like any proper playland, it has rides, both scary and docile; but whichever, most have musical names. A corkscrew roller coaster that inverts your insides while it turns you upside down twice is called the Wabash Cannonball. Another is called the Rock 'n' Roller Coaster. Even the more placid outings, such as the German Carousel with swings suspended from its top, known here as the Tennessee Waltz, adopt musical names.

The young visitors prefer Opryland's rides. There are 19 from which to choose. This year's nausea inducer is a contraption called The Barnstormer, a 92-foot tower from which a dozen four-passenger biplanes built to resemble vintage craft are suspended on cables. The planes are spun around the tower, and then the cables are released, allowing the planes to drop 40 feet in a free fall guaranteed to leave one's stomach on a passing tuft of cumulus.

Opryland is based on musical themes, and not just country and western. Scattered around the grounds are 13 live musical shows, the most extravagant of which is a pastiche called *Broadway!*, new this year, employing 18 singers and a 16-piece orchestra. Performed on the stage of the new Opry

House, *Broadway!* includes snatches of shows designed to summon nostalgic treacle from almost any age group.

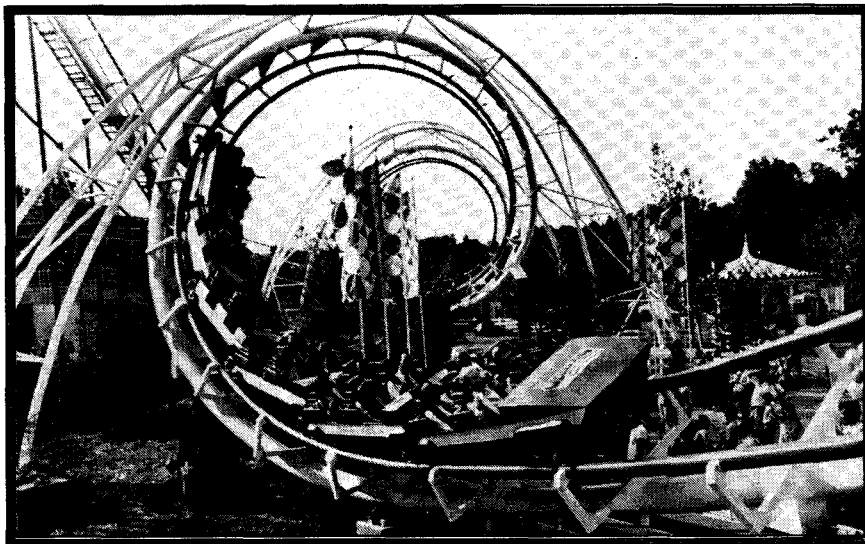
Ragtime, Gibson Girls, and lots of George M. Cohan are swirled into a turn-of-the-century show called *For Me and My Gal*. The perennial "I Hear America Singing" is a flag-waver in the "Up with People" style that traces the nation's history through song.

OPRYLAND'S ACRES are subdivided into music-minded neighborhoods. New Orleans stages a Dixieland show, and its Café Mardi Gras, in a loose reach for the French flavor that hangs over the delta, serves A La Burgers, Olé Burgers, and U.S. Burgers. For dessert, one can report to La Fudgerie. On the other hand, the Hill-Country Area is meant to be a chunk of Appalachian outback where the Country Kettle dishes up a bowl of white beans and ham hocks served with corn cakes.

Those culinary treasures, sometimes spelled in a version of hill-country talk—an embellishment I shall spare you—go down easily with bluegrass and other country music that emanate from the Folk Music Theatre.

The Fifties, which provided a music and a culture quite their own, are recalled with historical tendresse in the quarter known as Doo Wah Diddy City. In that preserve, the hostesses perform with hula-hoops, and the clean-up squad travels about wearing saddle shoes and roller skates. Groups resurrect the music of the Fifties in the Juke Box Theatre, which has a second stage in back known as The Flip Side Theater. Lots of Chubby Checker stuff here, and in keeping with that era in which "The Twist" was the hymn of the times, even the hamburger stand is known as Chubby's Drive-In.

A big weekend in these purloined might include an arch-straining day at Opryland, followed by dinner at Old Hickory; and if one is lucky, a night at the Grand Ole Opry. The country and western show plays there on Friday and Saturday nights, and there are often added matinees. There is something that is somehow incongruous about choosing between southern velvet (oysters, shallots, cream, white Burgundy, combined "in a manner favored by Andrew Jackson at Rips Raps, an island retreat off Norfolk, Virginia, that served as the presidential vacation home") and the chateaubriand bouqetière for two ("Created by the chef of François René de Chateaubriand, French author, diplomat, and political leader, this double cut of beef tenderloin served with sauce Béarnaise



The Wabash Cannonball—"Turns you upside down twice."

gained international favor during Andrew Jackson's time") in a svelte corner of Old Hickory and then plunging into the vast modern arena that is the new Grand Ole Opry to find the proceedings more folksy than a Grange supper. On the night I was there, with tickets in hand for the second show, the performers included Roy Acuff, Grandpa Jones, George Hamilton IV, and Hank Snow, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Haven Hamilton in the film *Nashville*, which as far as epics go ranks in these parts with *The Birth of a Nation*. Each performer went on the air



America Singing—"Flag-waver."

sponsored by such patrons as Beechnut Chewing Tobacco, Trailblazer dog foods, and Baltz's country ham and sausage meats. A large advertising billboard carrying the company's message was unrolled in back of the performers as they stepped to the microphone, and as was the practice in the warm old days of live radio, played in front of audiences, the announcer often asked for applause.

As with the audience—one must stay in step with the local idiom—we munched on Goo-Goo Clusters, which are not exactly a misnomer and come

with a guarantee to remove any bridge-work not cemented down with Epoxy, and marveled at the rapturous attention all this twanging was getting from the assemblage.

When we slipped out, Hank Snow was alone at the microphone, holding 4,400 people in thrall by singing the sad ballad of "Old Shep," the musical saga of a pup who grew up with his master, even saved him once during a tricky interlude at the old swimming hole, but finally, with old-dog age, had to be put to rest. "Not a dry eye in the house," whispered a Tennessee friend guiding me out through the wings.

After that moment of doloroso, we stopped for a nightcap at the Stagedoor Lounge of the Opryland Hotel, where we found a table up in the rafters from which we could look down on Darleen Shadeen, the featured performer, a comely lady done up in red top hat, red jacket, and slacks to match.

After an interval of disco numbers that lured a number of gyrators out of the tiers and onto the dance floor, Darleen commanded the stage again and swung into a monumental rendition of "Dixie." It rose like a stirring hymn, backed as it was by a nest of noise producers that included a Crumman Traveler T1 organ, a Yamaha electric grand piano, an Arp Imni synthesizer, an Arp 2600 synthesizer, a Hohner D-6 clavinet, a Rhodes electric piano, as well as an assortment of keyboard amplifiers, guitars, and drums. It went off in a rumble of decibels and emotion and came to a close with a spluttering detonation of rebel yells and loud shouts from the customers. It seemed a propitious moment for a visiting Yank to slink off to bed, hopefully unnoticed, unaccosted, and unset upon. ●

SPORTING LIFE

Hungry Tigers

by Jonathan Evan Maslow

BY THE TIME the Detroit Tigers reached Baltimore, just before Memorial Day, they occupied one of those illusory positions, almost unique to baseball standings, in which a team seems to be rolling along in first place but is actually a half game off the pace because another team has played more games. In the newspapers, the arithmetical quirk looks like this:

	WON	LOST	%	GAMES BEHIND
DETROIT	23	12	.657	½
BOSTON	24	14	.650	—

But baseball statistics, like paint-by-number landscapes, are significant only when you begin filling in the details. You need to know, for example, that the Tigers' starting lineup averages a mite under twenty-five years of age, with less than three years' playing experience in the majors; that the majority of the roster are hot off the Tigers' minor league farm club in Evansville, Indiana, more than grateful for the opportunity to play in "the Bigs," eager to strut their stuff, and generally sport higher batting averages than salaries.

The oracles of the sporting press looked these Tiger kids up and down and snickered, "Maybe decent enough for a gentlemanly third place."

But one needs to see the gently smiling crow's-feet around the eyes of Ralph Houk, that ancient and venerable Detroit manager whose teams finished fourth, fifth, and sixth in their past three campaigns. Houk's smile is a bulwark against impatience. It refuses to disappear even when one of his young charges boots a grounder, misses a cutoff man, or rashly throws to the wrong base, as rookies have been known to do. Houk sticks his fists deep into the pockets of his nylon warm-up jacket and says nothing. He's not preachy, nor is he a straw boss; perhaps that's because he recognizes the iron law of life that Young Turks exist only for the specific purpose of knocking off the old guard.

"Sure, Boston and New York are better than us," the Detroit manager admits. "We've got young players who are going to get better. They've got name players, but veterans don't usually improve. Right now, I believe we have the best young team in the Amer-

ican League. We've developed more players than any team in baseball. What we've got to do now is put this thing together. It's tough because we're competing against teams that have spent millions of dollars. We don't have any Reggie Jacksons, paid \$3 million to come play for a while. I think a ball club you develop is a lot better than one you go out and buy."

And so does John Fetzer, the Tigers' owner. Fetzer, a seventy-eight-year-old Detroit media mogul with no heirs and a mile-wide streak of thriftiness, runs his franchise on the principle that given time, the proper advice, and Houk's encouragement, hungry young bloods earning their first tenderloin will out-produce the fat cat free agents. According to Fetzerism, you build up your team not with fancy trades and costly plunges into the free-agent pool but with sharp scouting of colleges, crafty drafting, and shrewd promotions from the farm system straight to the Tiger lineup.

The Kansas City Royals have employed a similar philosophy in creating a perennial division winner, and the Chicago White Sox' president, Bill Veeck, annually strings together a motley crew of teen-agers and castoffs (mainly because the White Sox can't afford better). But no one in the leagues has out-Fetzered Fetzer in forming a high-potential, low-wage team. According to Major League Players' Association figures, the Tigers rank twenty-second among the 26 clubs in total payroll, with an average salary of \$46,000, as compared with the major league average of \$75,000. Callers at the Tigers' front office are straightway informed, "We are constitutionally opposed to the creation of young sports millionaires."

For this reason, John Fetzer and the Detroit Tigers are honored wherever skinflints cling to the antique notion that the money baseball players receive should be viewed more as a child's allowance than as compensation for professional services rendered.

But salary quibbles are proper winter talk and should be banned from April through October. With the season in swing, the thing to do is to forget that agents and contracts exist, and the better thing to do is to note how refreshing it is to see Detroit's ingenues playing energetic, heads-up baseball. But the

best thing is to listen—amid whirring blow dryers and snapping jockstraps in the locker room—to the forgivable arrogance of twenty-four-year-old first baseman Jason Dolph Thompson and twenty-four-year-old left fielder Steve Kemp, who came east just a few weeks ago, warning that the Tigers could wrest the pennant from the Red Sox and the Yankees.

There is eagerness aplenty in the Tigers' dugout as streams of tobacco juice splat on the floor, like hailstones plunking on a tin roof. One of the most eager is lead-off man Ron LeFlore, a paroled convict the Tigers signed after an exhibition game at Southern Michigan Prison. LeFlore really arrived last year, collecting 212 hits, a .325 average, and 39 stolen bases, thereby becoming the first Tiger to steal 20 or more bases four seasons in a row since Ty Cobb did that more than 60 years ago. Cobb was certainly the meaner runner, but LeFlore is probably faster and is surely more impetuous. He's been joined by a second sprinter—twenty-one-year-old Lou Whitaker, called up by Houk from Evansville this spring. Slim and spidery, Sweet Lou brought with him the reputation of having been the Florida State League's MVP in 1976, with 48 stolen bases. He accounted for Detroit's only win of the Baltimore series, stealing second base in the eighth inning of the second game, then scoring on Kemp's single through the left side for a one-run lead. If the LeFlore-Whitaker punch accounts for an extra dozen runs per season, this factor alone may lift the Tigers into contention.

THE VIRTUE of base path speed becomes apparent when you get down to the Detroit "tater hitters," the term the picturesque George Scott uses to refer to legitimate sluggers. Rusty Staub, a thirty-four the old man of the club, exemplifies how the designated-hitter rule should work in ideal form, granting an underrated star a few career stretching years of grace. Staub provides not only stability to the young team but also clutch hits. Last year, he drove in the winning run 10 times and was second in the league with go ahead runs batted in. At the plate Staub reminds one of a tugboat—stubby, slow, hauling his considerable tonnage with endearing determination