

Saturday night at the brand new Grand Ole Opry house where President Nixon attended and even played at the grand opening; below Roy Acuff, a 37-year veteran of the Opry takes a last look from the stage of Ryman Auditorium, where the final performance was given Friday.

Photos by Ken Fell  
—The Washington Post

# *The Grand Ole Opry*

## *Ain't Po' No Mo'*

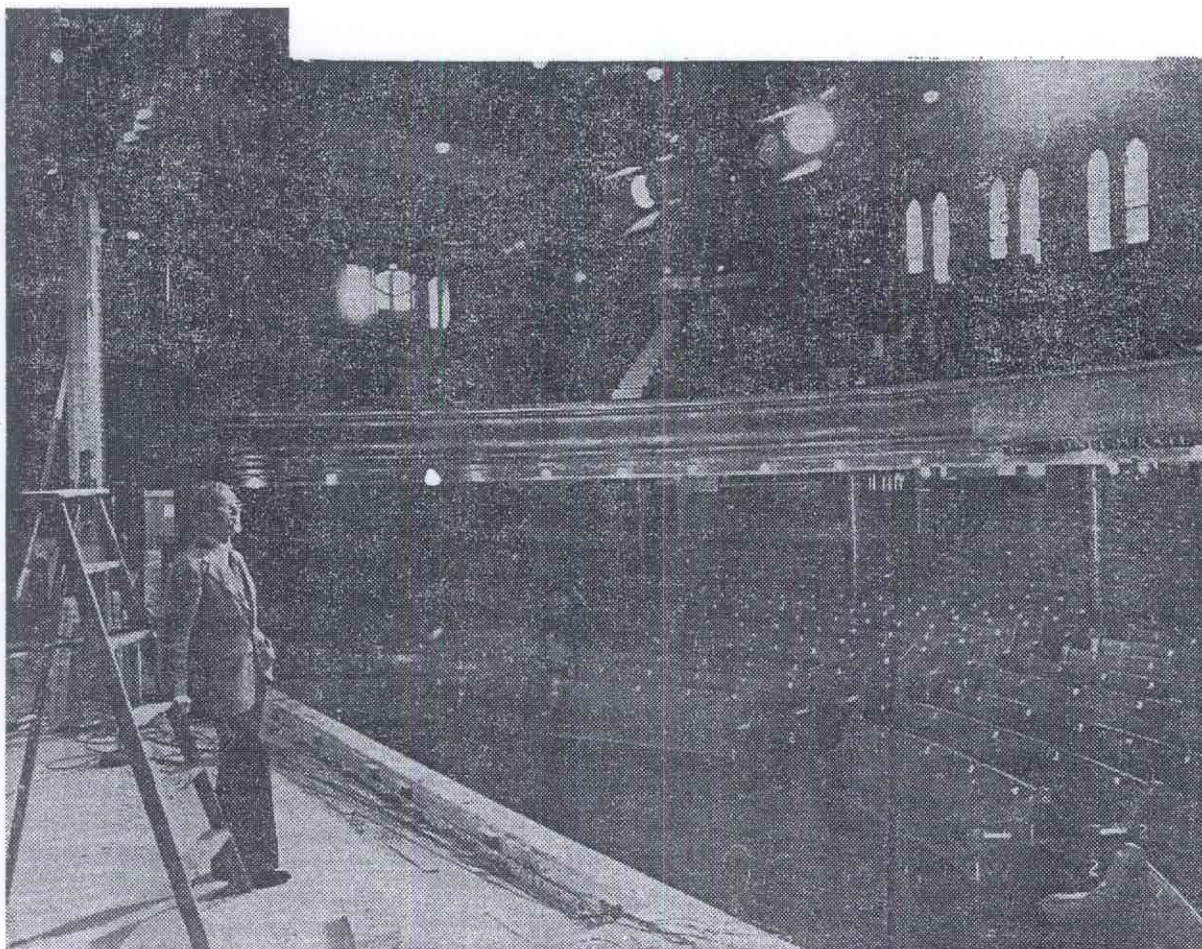
*"The old man turned off the radio  
and said*

*'Where did all the old songs go?'"*

—*"What is Truth"* by Johnny Cash  
Copyright 1969 by House of Cash, Inc.

*"Come and lay down by my side*





*Till the early morning light.  
All I'm asking is your time.  
Help me make it through the  
night."*

—"Help Me Make It Through the Night"  
by Kris Kristofferson.  
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### *By Jeannette Smyth*

NASHVILLE — Whisperin' Bill Anderson and his band, The Po' Boys, stepped out on the stage for some pickin' and singin' Saturday night.

"He came here claiming he was a po' boy," Roy Acuff, the King of Country music, told the crowd jamming the brand-new, red-swagged \$15 million Grand Ole Opry House. "But I don't think so."

It's been a long time since either Whisperin' Bill or most of the 4,400 opening night audience were poor folks. Country music is big business and, for many, good politics.

"There's a whole lot of people looking down their noses at me," sang Whisperin' Bill Anderson. He sang a song about poor folks living in a rich folks' world, about being so poor when he grew up that the wolf at the

door had to pack its own picnic lunch. But they got by, the song continued, by patching the cracks of their shack with love.

Winding up, Anderson leaned toward the microphone. "Everybody here tonight is po' folks," he told the

VIP audience. The crowd wahoed and applauded.

In Oshkosh B'Gosh Overalls or mink stoles, "po" is a state of mind.

A down-home President Nixon was to arrive later on to play the piano, spin Acuff's trademark yo-yo, tell some pretty good jokes. Meanwhile, four governors, including Alabama's George Wallace, two senators, 13 congressmen, Nashville's insurance millionaires who own the Grand Ole Opry and its new \$26-million Opryland amusement park, were among the invited guests opening night, along with "virtually every known candidate for governor of Tennessee," as one of the millionaires put it.

In the balcony sat the fans who'd brought tickets months ago: a denim Mafia of freaky fans, blue-collar couples in slacks on bus tours, knit-suit-ed young men and their bouffanted



dates, people who work and vote and buy \$350 million worth of country records every year.

Wallace and his wife, Cornelia (who sang with Roy Acuff in the late 1950s), held court in front row seats, he in a powder blue knit suit and yellow shirt, she in lime green feathers.

"I just love you to death, Governor Wallace," one of the women with Instamatics said. "Can I kiss you?"

"I want to shake hands with the next President of the United States," a fat man said.

The ancient Crook Brothers, who started out with the Opry in 1925, are warming up the audience. They dedicate their harmonica-fiddle-piano-guitar instrumental "Amazing Grace" to Wallace.

See OPRY, B2, Col. 1

#### OPRY, From B1

Later, with President Nixon sitting in a box, stage left, the fat comedian Jerry Clower, in a yellow suit, said "Folks who used to make fun of me for being country — HOOOOOOOIE! — I said, 'It's sort of like home to those of wish they could see me now.'" In a pointed joke, he added "Governor (Wallace), if any trouble starts, I'm on your side."

Country music became a potent cultural force in America when radio began in 1920. Radio has made a McLuhanesque global village of a widely scattered rural population which has been listening to the Grand Ole Opry for three generations.

Some 35 million people listen to country music. Ninety per cent of it is recorded in Nashville, where four major and 18 independent recording studios have the corner on the multi-million-dollar market.

The culture and values which country music represents are broadcast at night over 12 "clear" radio channels to nearly 60 per cent of the United States land area. WSM-radio, founded in 1925 by Nashville's National Life and Accident Insurance Co., broadcasts on clear channel 650 with a powerful 50,000 watt beam. The station is seeking permission from the Federal Communications Commission to quadruple that wattage.

Leroy and Ethel DeSmith vote the Democratic ticket, and they would have voted for McGovern in the last election if something hadn't prevented them from getting to the polls that

day.

They like Lawrence Welk.

They like to travel. They have visited Niagara Falls and Glacier National Park in Jasper, Canada, in their camper trailer. They came to Opryland on a bus tour from their home in Sheboygan, Wisc.

About the President's Nashville visit, Leroy, who works in a paint-sprayer factory, says, "I think he's trying to get back to the people. He's trying to get back something that's wrong, that the people think he's wrong. I still think he's wrong."

Howard Thomas, a logger from Greensboro, Ga., declared he'd voted Republican since 1942. "I've never voted Democratic. The Democrats have never run anything but what we consider white trash for President."

"He's got more character than anybody I've ever seen, said Betty Jo Webb, on the same bus tour as the Thomases. "I'm just a little old Georgia girl but that's what I think. I think it's tacky to attack the President of the United States."

The President is yo-yoing. The pretty young thing in the usher outfit says glowingly, "God, he's human isn't he!"

It is late Friday night, getting on to Saturday morning, and the Grand Ole Opry's last performance in the 84-year-old former tabernacle they've broadcast from for 31 years is coming to a close. Tonight, the Grand Ole Gospel Time follows the Opry, making a four-hour marathon into a six or seven-hour one.

The American flag at stage right is spotlighted. The Opry audience—3,000 people who visit the Coke stand in the back, or step outside the old fire trap for a cigarette when the Victorian pews begin to press the flesh too sternly—is a quiet one. Sometimes they clap a little to the bluegrass rhythm. Sometimes they sing along softly.

They are tired; the average Opry fan drives 400 or 500 miles to Nashville from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Texas.

The Rev. Jimmy Snow is jumping. "How many of you would like to go back to the simple things," he shouts. "Do you want to go back to the simplicity of the gospel?"

Behind him on the stage are Johnny Cash, Johnnys wife, June Carter Cash, her mother, Maybelle Carter, scores of gospel singers including Hank Snow, "Pastor Jimmy's" father, glittering in a sequinned rose satin suit and toupee. Johnny Cash is scratching his chin.

Pastor Jimmy asks the audience to stand up for Jesus and for America. Some do. "Say it with me out loud, and mean it," says Pastor Jimmy. "Be sincere. 'Jesus, I am a sinner.' Let me hear you say it. I cannot say it myself. 'I stand in your presence to come into



your heart." The crowd murmurs. "Can I hear you say it nice and loud?" says Pastor Jimmy softly. "I love you, Jesus."

The evening had started at 7 p.m. Friday with the Grand Ole Opry stars singin' and pickin', with breaks in the entertainment for veteran announcer Grant Turner to read advertisements for Odom Sausage, Kroger Stores, Schlitz and Beechnut Chewing Tobacco, the sponsors who buy each half-hour of time. Some stars have been sponsored by the same company for so many years they put the name on their stationery — "Very sincerely, Lester Platt, Sponsored by Martha White Foods Inc."

Hundreds of fans were turned away and some stood in the rain outside leaning through the old Gothic windows to see the show.

Herbert Hinkle, a dour Mothofce-nica, W. Va., livestock farmer, drove 12 hours to visit the Opry for the first time. Hinkle, toting his portable tape recorder, wore a crisp brown and cream Western jacket, his wife a mink-collared suede coat and a pantsuit. They had sent for their tickets a month ago.

Richard Collier, a Nashville architect who wore a bow tie, had been in-

vited to the Opry for the first time by friends from WSM. "I love country music," he said, but he hadn't set foot in the Ryman since his graduation ceremonies in 1936 from Hume Fogg High School. "Frankly, I'm scared to death of it," he said.

Desmond Boutwell, who resembles Harry Truman in a Stetson, said he'd driven 12 hours from Jay, Fla., where he'd just struck oil. "I been coming here for years," he said. "I used to drive school bus loads of kids from Jay up here for the weekend.

"I started listening to the Grand Ole Opry when I was a kid." He likes Hank Locklin best of the stars. "I guess I would have to say he was one of my home boys.

"We'll miss this place," Boutwell said "It's sort of like home to those of us who enjoy country music. Opryland? Well, its just going to be new. I'm going to have to get used to it. It'll be nice, and fine, but everybody is going to have to get used to it.

"The performance tonight is just about the same thing it's always been," Boutwell continued. "They got a few new girls starting out. The way everybody talked, we figured there would be a little crying and carrying on. But it doesn't look like there will be."

It had not escaped anybody's atten-



*Hank Snow sings at the old Grand Ole Opry.*

tion that the Ryman was ending as it began—with evangelism. It was built, starting in 1889, by a formerly wicked Cumberland River boat captain named Tom Ryman, who had been converted by a Georgia preachers tent-meeting sermon on motherhood and wanted to build the evangelist a tabernacle.

A "Confederate Balcony" was added in 1897 for a confederate soldiers reunion. A stage was built over the pulpit at the turn of the century, a stage on which the touring Nijinsky, Caruso, Billy Sunday, Carrie Nation, Tyrone Power, Doris Day and Alma Gluck appeared over the years. After four moves in 14 years to accommodate an ever-burgeoning audience, the Grand Ole Opry moved to the Ryman Auditorium in 1943. When WSM bought the Ryman in 1963, they changed its name to the Grand Ole Opry House.

It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but WSM president Irving Waugh caused a minor furor when he said they'd raze the Ryman and use its hand-made bricks and funky pews to build the "Little Church of Opryland," a nondenominational chapel, at their \$26 million homespun amusement park, Opryland U.S.A., where the new Opry house opened Saturday night.

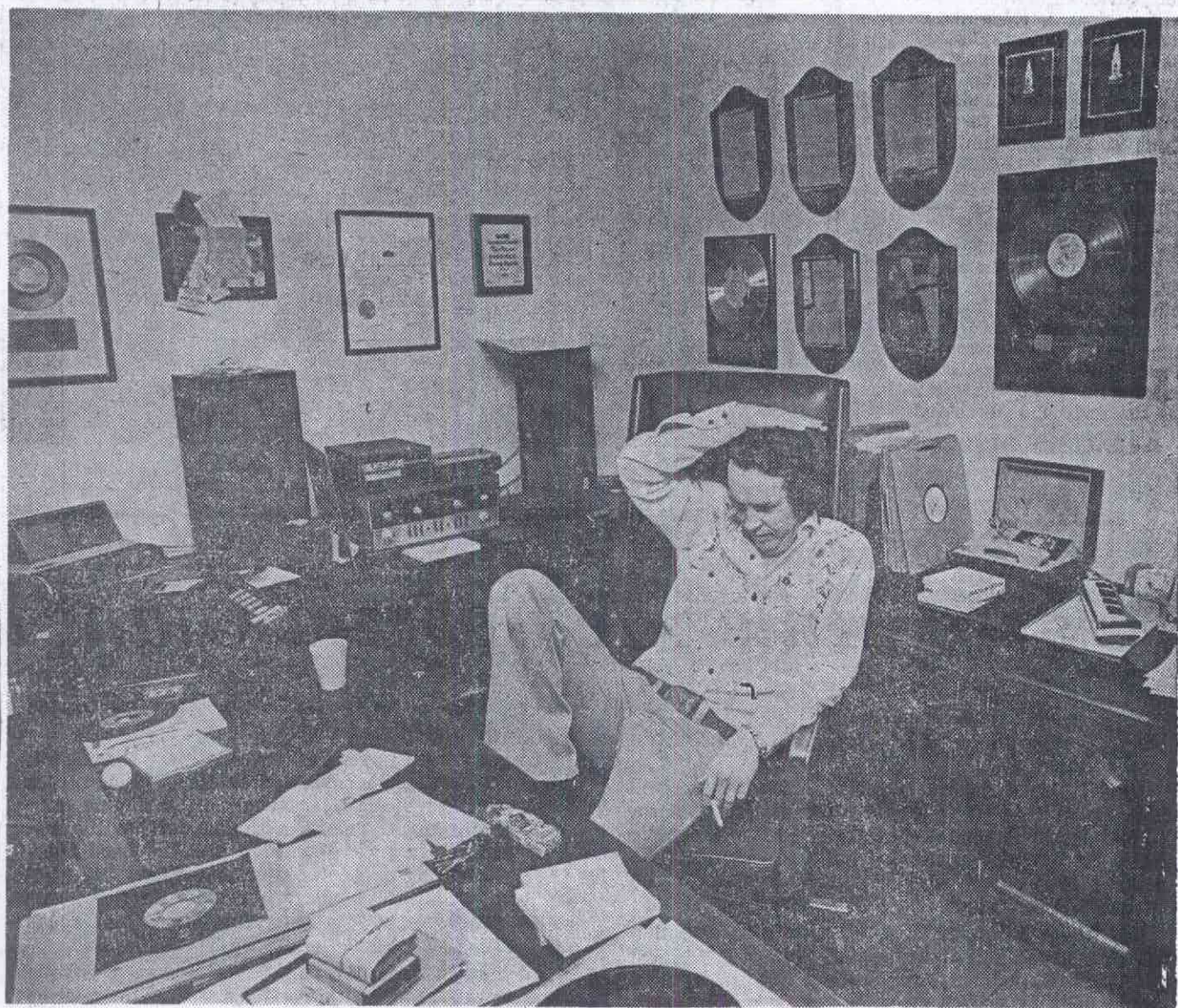
National Life and Accident Insurance Co. hired New York stage designer Jo Mielziner who, not surprisingly, decided the Ryman was not worth saving, while company officials maintained it would cost \$3 million to renovate. WSM president Irving Waugh said no decision as to the Ryman's fate will be made before May.

In his book, "The Country Music Story," Robert Shelton accounts for the widening appeal of country music. Trade groups such as the Country Music Association, formed in 1956, line up commercial sponsors for increased radio and television programming; the Tin Pan Alley song writers are writing songs for teeny-boppers with a resulting decline in the appeal of lyrics and melodies for grown-ups; the migration of rural Southerners to urban World War II defense plants brought country music to the city; and, finally, city people fed up with urban life are turning to country music.

Further, rock musicians with wide appeal to the young audience have introduced it to the country sound. Bob Dylan's "Blonde on Blonde" album was the first rock record to be recorded in Nashville.

Dylan then went "country"—more lyrical—producing his "John Wesley Harding" and "Nashville Skyline" albums. He did more to countrify rock than other arts, but Nashville's hot young record producer of the moment, Columbia's Billy Sherrill, says Dylan had no effect on his life at all. He's never been to the Grand Ole Opry, ei-





George Washington takes the oath of office.

*Billy Sherrill, Nashville's hottest young record producer, in his office. Ninety per cent of country music is recorded in Nashville.*

ther.

As Columbia Records' vice president for artists and repertoire in Nashville, Sherrill is responsible for such country hits as "Behind Closed Doors," "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World" and "Stand By Your Man," which he wrote with Tammy Wynette.

The other day he played Tammy Wynette's newest single for a visitor, called "No Charge" by Tina and

Mommy. Tina is Miss Wynette's 8-year-old daughter, and the song has the child presenting a \$14.75 bill to her mother for services rendered—going to the store, making her bed. Miss Wynette, a millionaire, sings that she's standing in the kitchen, "Fixin' supper," wipes her hands on her apron, and tells the child that "for the nine

months I carried you, No Charge," followed by a list of motherly work like wiping noses and walking the floor at night.

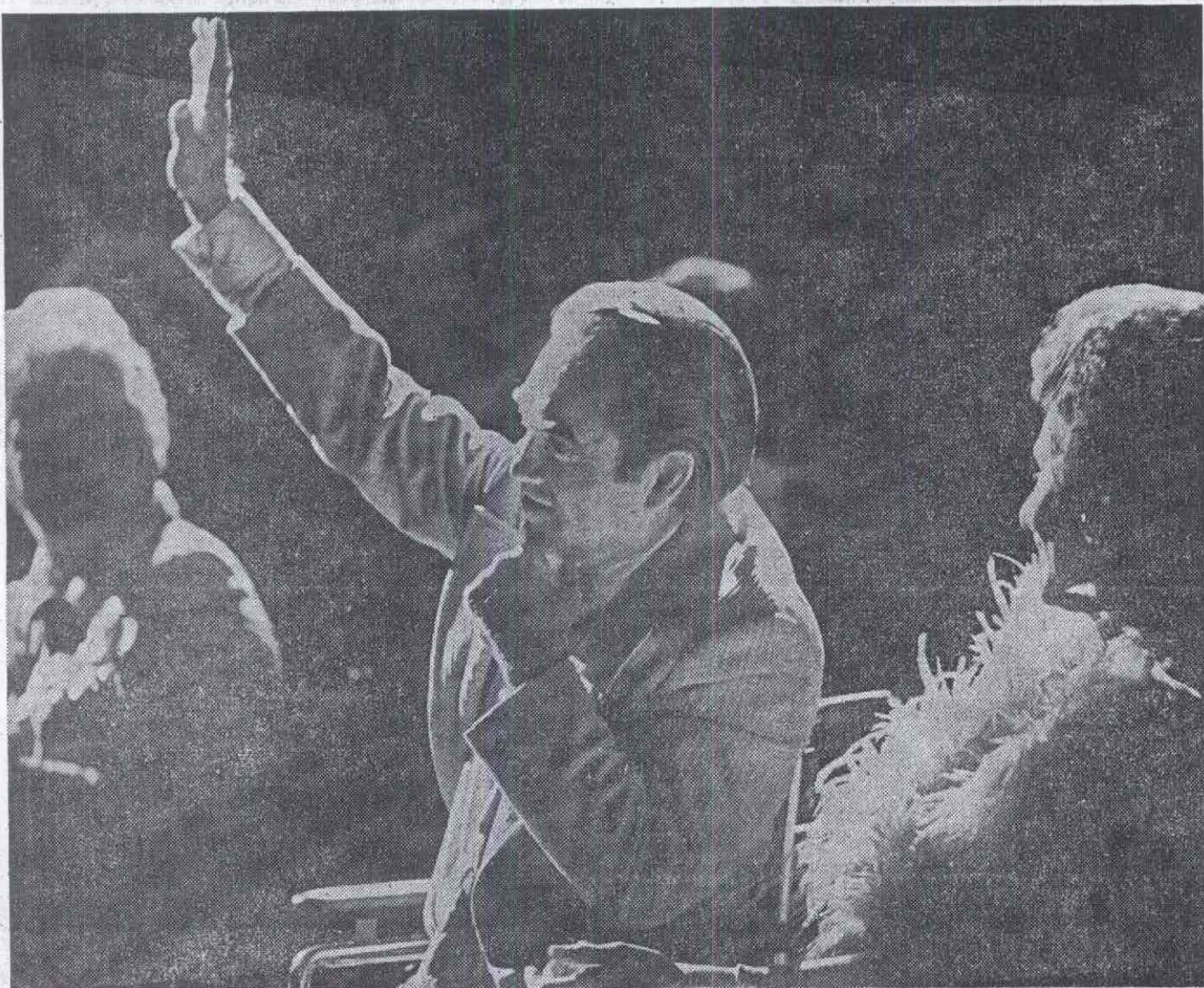
"It's the only music today that's right down to the American way of life," says Roy Acuff. "It's for families."

"You can really get into the lyrics," says Sherrill. "I think it's adult music." He credits Kris Kristofferson with causing a breakthrough to franker, better lyrics with his 1970 hit, "Help Me Make It Through the Night."

"That loosened up the good writers around town," Sherrill says. "You can say things now you couldn't before." He cites as an example Miss Wynette's last hit, in which she says the word "damn." "I thought the way we did it was very tasty," Sherrill says. "She didn't like it. She cried all night."

What about the oldtimers like Roy Acuff and Minnie Pearl who have ob-





*Alabama Gov. George Wallace and his wife, Cornelia, held court Saturday night from their front-row seats.*

jected over the years to amplified music, drums and now sex in country music? "They don't sell any records," Sherrill grins.

Performers and producers alike feel that country music has been discriminated against from a money-making point of view.

"The only thing that really galls me," says Sherrill, "is the old cowboy boots and hay image country music has had. Because we live under this stigma, they say, 'Aw, that's country.' It may be selling 8 million records, but it's a country song."

Acuff, like most of the 62 regular Grand Ole Opry performers, feels no sorrow in leaving the funky old Ryman for the luxurious new Opry House 10 miles out of town.

"It irritates me to think that no other musicians would put up with this place," Acuff says, waving his hand at the Ryman's Confederate Gallery, where football sized slabs of gilt have fallen away to reveal the lathing. He

looks at the cracking green plaster and the cramped stage. "Most of my memories of the Ryman auditorium are of misery, sweating out here on this stage, the audience suffering too. But at Opryland, people are being treated respectably."

People who think the new Opry House is too slick are "foolish," he says. "It's first class, and nothing is too good for country music. We've been shackled all of my career," says the 37-year Opry veteran. He found the tiny, shabby dressing rooms at the Ryman so cramped he bought a building across the alley so he could have a bigger one.

Then too, the Opry performers have been looked down upon by Nashville society, which likes to emphasize the highbrow culture of the place by calling it the "Athens of the South," a reference to the many colleges there, from Pat Boone's alma mater, David Lipscomb College, to Fisk and Vanderbilt Universities.

"Our people in Nashville don't want to come down here," Acuff says. "They thought the Ryman was a good place



for country music. A slum."

So there is a kind of Okie-from-Muskogee militancy among the performers, which appeals to all those fans who in turn attract politicians looking to score points with the heartland constituency. Acuff himself ran for governor in 1948 on the Republican ticket.

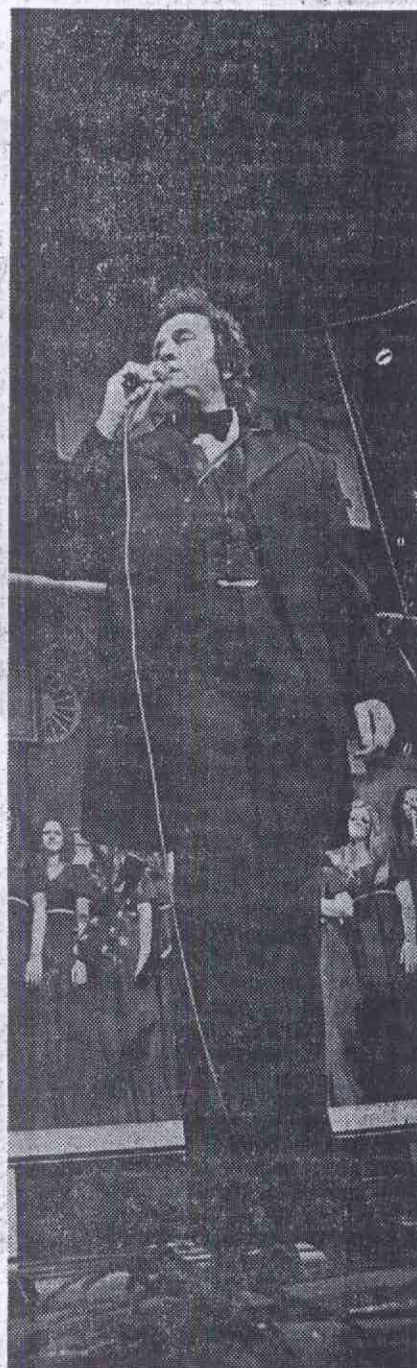
"I'm proud to be a hillbilly," says Acuff. "All of my people ahead of me were hillbillies. I've been taught right—to respect people."

With those sentiments enjoying some vogue, Acuff and the Opry moved "uptown"—to the suburbs—Saturday night, to the compliments of people, some of whom used to call them hillbillies. President Nixon's visit, says Acuff, "is the greatest compliment that's ever been paid to country music."

With its pink-flowered oil-cloth bar, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge is the Sardi's of Nashville. Opry stars used to step

across the alley from the old Ryman for a break in the four-hour broadcast for a beer and adulation. They attract groupies, bus tours, musicians either hopeful or has-been, winos, songwriters, and an apologetic black man who for \$2 will take a Polaroid of you with—oh say, second string Opry star Del Reeves, in his green suit and pink ruffled shirt and diamond ring.

It was raining last Friday night, but the alley behind the Ryman was full of people. Roy Acuff drove through in his olive Mercedes Benz. A man named Billy Wilhelm, middle-aged, moustached, accompanied by his wife, was handing out copies of a 45-RPM record of his to anybody who looked influential. "They say it takes five years in Nashville to get heard and seen," says Billy Wilhelm. "I've lived my five years . . ."



*Johnny Cash performs at the closing set on Friday night.*





*Part of Saturday night's audience at the new, \$15-million house were formally attired, in*



Photos by Ken Felt—The Washington Post

*contrast to the regular crowd which showed up the night before to bid farewell to Ryman's.* <sup>9</sup>