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Night Train to Nashville: Music City Rhythm and Blues, 1945-1970. Country Music Hall of Fame.

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Let me first begin by telling you that I am not a musicologist, a music historian, or even a musician, although I love music in all its forms. I am instead a museum person with a specialty in exhibits. I have over twenty years experience with exhibit design and construction and have taught graduate students at Wright State University the basics of exhibit work for the last thirteen years. I have been accused of being super-critical of exhibits and having a built-in bias against exhibit design firms who, I believe, stress visual form over educational function. <p> With all this said, I found <cite>Night Train to Nashville: Music City Rhythm and Blues, 1945-1970</cite> a remarkable exhibit. The production of this exhibit will finally put to rest any lasting opinion that the Country Music Hall of Fame is just a collection of steel guitars and sequined jackets. <cite>Night Train</cite> is a scholarly work, of which any museum in this country should be proud. This is not to say the exhibit is without its faults. The biggest problem is the challenge imposed by the Hall of Fame's temporary exhibit space, but the selection of artifacts, the research and the writing more than make up for the difficult exhibit layout. <p> <cite>Night Train</cite> is what is sometimes called a mirror exhibit. It presents to the visitor a piece of the recent past that was once familiar and now all but forgotten; like looking in a rearview mirror. In this case, the forgotten piece of history is Music City's rich rhythm and blues heritage. In the twenty-five-year period after World War II, Nashville was a center for the R & B scene, giving career breaks to artists as diverse as Jimi Hendrix and Little Richard. But this is not all, for the exhibit chronicles much more than a few artists that went on to become famous. The exhibit paints the picture of a community that was alive with dozens of opportunities for R & B performers. To quote

a line from the exhibit, "Nashville Really Jumps!" <p> The exhibit begins by laying the groundwork for this period in Nashville history. It explores the many opportunities that were available for young people wishing to learn to play. Credit is given to innovative high school music programs, live entertainment venues, like theaters and churches, and radio stations for giving birth to the Nashville scene. Radio and television were important to local as well as wider audiences. As B. B. King is quoted in the exhibit, "If some Southerners could have segregated the airways, they would have. But the beautiful part is that the airways are free." Unlike segregated theaters and other performance venues, broadcast media is free to all who have a radio or television. Rhythm and blues programming could be enjoyed by all people, introducing many black artists to white audiences. In Nashville and many other areas of the South reached by powerful radio stations, this was a revolution. <p> This brings us to one of the finest aspects of the exhibit. Its curators have allowed the story of this important time in Nashville's history to be told by the artists and audience members who were there. The participants are allowed to speak in their own words and, wherever possible, rare recordings of live performances are used. The result is that the visitor is immersed in the exhibit surrounded by both voices and music. The exhibit takes the visitor just about as far as an exhibit can in order to understand what this remarkable time in Music City was like. <p> Most importantly, the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and those who lived Nashville's R & B scene, have reached back into the near oblivion of the past to save an important portion of our nation's history. Thanks to the hard work of Michael Gray and his colleagues, not only is this legacy saved, but now it has the opportunity to be enjoyed by new audiences. The Hall of Fame took a great risk when it decided

to pursue *Night Train*. To many, Rhythm and Blues is about as far away from Country Music as one could get. In private moments, I am sure the staff wondered what the visitor response would be. The success of the exhibit proves that the staff was correct and that the leap between music genres is not so wide as we often think. A negative visitor response to the exhibit might have meant the end of such ventures at the Country Music Hall of Fame. Hopefully, *Night Train*'s success now means that there will be more to come. One of the challenges that museum professionals often have when developing an exhibit is in addressing the audience. Curators tend to develop their exhibits as if they are speaking to other curators or to people who know as much about a given subject as they do. This is not the case with *Night Train*. The voices here are those of the performers who lived the subject. This was the goal of the project from the beginning. The exhibit was shaped by oral history, and guided by a diverse and talented advisory committee. All exhibits should begin this way, but very few do. The fruits of this approach are obvious. The use of graphics and artifact selection in the exhibit are very rich. Many of the photographs and artifacts are rare and one of a kind. They could only be obtained as a result of the strong interaction between museum staff and the people who experienced the Nashville music scene. The African-American community, like many minority communities, has been reluctant to share material with museums due, in part, to museum practices, which sought artifacts, but offered no voice in the development of programming. This is obviously not the case with the Hall of Fame and the producers of *Night Train*. This is not to say that the exhibit targets a minority audience. The exhibit has been enjoyed by a variety of persons, who found the stories compelling and entertaining. An informal poll, taken by this reviewer, of a variety of individuals touring the exhibit found the reaction to be enthusiastically positive. Many visitors commented that they never knew that Nashville was so rich musically in anything but Country Music. Others were surprised to see the many links between Country and Rhythm and Blues; a subject cleverly discussed using computer kiosks in the exhibit. Visitors are given the chance to hear two recorded versions of the same song, one recorded by a country artist and one by an R & B artist. Sadly, all is not perfect in paradise. As stated before, *Night Train* has a few design problems, which is more of a reflection of the difficult temporary gallery space and the work of the outside design firm than museum staff or curatorship. The exhibit opens with a remarkable photograph. The damaged picture shows a

musical band of adults and young people seated in some long gone, rough venue, holding instruments, with a sign that reads, "Feed the Kitty." Obviously this band plays for tips. The eight-member group includes a drummer, piano player, a quartet of brass and a singer or two. The brass section seems entirely made up of children. The sepia tone photograph is blown up to life size, and the people in the photo stare, through the distance of time, directly into the eye of the visitor. The image is strong and powerful, speaking volumes about music and the lives of these people. There is an emotional connection here; the miles and distance of time seem not so great. The photo establishes a mood and theme for the exhibit, yet the temper brought by the photograph is not exploited in the exhibit. Passing this powerful photograph, the true entry into the exhibit is flanked by a large graphic with the title of the exhibit reflected on a giant ticket stub—a good choice as the tour of the exhibit is an enjoyable ticket to ride. Unfortunately on the entry opposite the ticket graphic is a large glass case containing a replica of some music producer's office. The office is a permanent installation and not technically part of the *Night Train* exhibit. Although the museum staff is quick to point out that the producer actually produced albums for some of the subjects featured in the exhibit, the connection is tenuous at best. The producer's office subtracts from the exhibit by being out of place. At the opening of the exhibit, the visitor has the opportunity to go in two directions. In exhibit terms this is referred to as the "flow." Going left takes the visitor to a section inhabited by two tabletop display cases and a semi-circular wall. The wall contains a collection of photographs and text that helps give the visitor some background on the subject of the exhibit. Going right takes the visitor into the main body of the exhibit. Unfortunately, going left not only introduces the visitor to the background of the exhibit but it takes the visitor directly out of the exhibit and on to the next gallery. In order to see the rest of the exhibit the visitors must retrace their steps and backtrack through the exhibit. Since some visitors will not take this action their exhibit experience ends here. If the visitors turn right upon entering the exhibit, they are rewarded by a number of entertaining and informative exhibit sections. These sections are rich in visual and auditory media, the highlight of which is a large projection of film clips from the television programs *Night Train* and *The!!!Beat*. The sound quality is remarkable, with none of the scratchiness or distortion one might expect. Someone has worked magic to make these recordings sound fresh and brand new. The music is a celebration of hard work and talent, not

only of the original performers but also of the sound engineers and museum staff who saved them from being forever lost. Unfortunately, given the small space, the music from five or more sound venues all playing different performances at once becomes difficult to enjoy. After an hour in the exhibit gallery this reviewer needed to find an aspirin. The use of sound domes, devices designed to focus sound only in one area, and the use of sound absorbing materials would have helped greatly. This mistake could be the result of not viewing music, or other sound media as a traditional museum artifact. Artifacts need the correct space to be fully understood and not crowded by other artifacts or taken out of context. Music just needs more space than some artifacts. <p>The subject of music brings me to my last criticism of the exhibit. It is sad to think that this exhibit, given all the hard work that went into it, the importance of the subject matter, and the unbelievable soundtrack, is only tempo-

rary. The content of the exhibit as well as the supporting educational material are a museum triumph. Somehow this exhibit should continue in a traveling exhibit venue. Ironically, at the same time that <cite>Night Train to Nashville</cite> is on exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Tennessee State Historical Museum is hosting the traveling exhibit of the Rau collection. The Rau collection exhibit is a very popular collection of master works of art put together by a traveling exhibits company with little or no input from the venues where the exhibit is showcased. The exhibit is a moneymaker, and in my opinion, a testimony to the decline of scholarship and locally relevant programming at our nation's museums. <cite>Night Train to Nashville</cite> shows us what museum professionals can do when given an opportunity to shine. Ten-gallon hats off to the Country Music Hall of Fame, its sponsors, and its staff for giving us such an exhibit treasure and legacy to enjoy.

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