

Stephen Buchanan, Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 21, 2022)

Benita Albert brings us the second and final part of her two-part Historically Speaking series on Steve Buchanan.

Steve Buchanan, 1975 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) alumnus, is a former President of the Gaylord Entertainment Group who oversaw operations of the Grand Ole Opry, the Ryman Auditorium, "Hee Haw" archives, and radio and TV broadcasts. He was the executive producer for the TV show, "Nashville." In 2018 he founded and now serves as President of SteadiBeat Media, a company which produces and consults for television, music, and live stage performances.

He has organized concerts for President George H. W. Bush and President Barrack Obama as well as the 80th Anniversary salute to the Grand Ole Opry at Carnegie Hall in 2005. He is much revered in Nashville for his visionary leadership in all matters concerning country music, from his inter-generational approach to artists and audiences to his promotional genius in preserving the rich legacy of country music via multiple media presentations. As a native son of Oak Ridge who defined his own unique career path in business entertainment, and as a person credited with increasing public interest in the Nashville artistic scene, Steve has made Tennesseans proud.

Steve's path to such a career evolved as he immersed himself in the activities of Vanderbilt University's student-led Concert Committee and as he realized that the concert scene was his passion. He spent an extra, undergraduate year at Vanderbilt changing majors from engineering to majors in Sociology and Psychology. His first job was with a country artists' talent agency, Buddy Lee Attractions, a Nashville institution where he made connections and learned the business and its history. Realizing that his interests required more business knowledge, while also questioning his choice of a music industry career, he chose to enroll in the Vanderbilt University Owen School of Business in 1983 to pursue an MBA degree. His focus was on marketing and management, seeking an organizational approach and a disciplined, strategic modeling foundation.

It was a gamble to apply for and subsequently accept the position of marketing manager for the Grand Ole Opry in 1985. The challenge was that he would begin work in a newly created position with no established budget. Daunting as it may have seemed at first, Steve was a natural. His first move was to conduct a market survey of what were existing practices and what aspects were in need of updating for the overall image of the Opry.

Steve helped bridge the gap between legendary artists and new aspiring artists while also reaching out to win a broader audience appeal, both generational and via technical and media innovations. He renovated while also maintaining the rich history of the fabled Ryman Auditorium, the original home of the Grand Ole Opry, first built in 1892 and opened as the Opry in 1943.

The building had fallen into disrepair in the 1960s and '70s. Steve's advocacy convinced his superiors at Gaylord that the Ryman renovation, though costly, would not only rebirth "the mother home of country music," but it would bring artists and tourists back to the inner city. (Having been there, I agree. It certainly has helped bring folks back to that part of Nashville – Ray)

Now, Nashville bustles with large, sell-out crowds at Ryman concerts as well as a thriving downtown music scene. All of this emerged as Steve was planning for bigger and broader audiences. Perhaps national exposure via a television production was in the future?

Steve's job description was fluid through his years with Gaylord Entertainment. He was appointed the General Manager of the Ryman Auditorium in 1993 as he oversaw the \$8.5 million renovation and reopening in 1994. In 1998 he was appointed President of the Opry Entertainment Group, a job he held until 2018. He executive produced special musical performances such as "Always...Patsy Cline" and "Bye, Bye Love, The Everly Brothers Musical." His theatrical resume' expanded to the Dallas Theater Center in 2015 where he led the production of "Moonshine: the Hee Haw Musical."

A 2012 interview with Steve described his job as overseeing four brands: the Ryman; The Opry; WSM radio, the home station of the Opry; and the "Hee Haw" archives. Steve further stated that the most important part of his job was "to build

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strong artists' and music relations, to provide emotional and financial support, and to foster an appreciation for their work and their legacy."

It seems Steve has met and worked with everyone in country music. However, his answer to those he wished he could have known, who predeceased his tenure, included Marty Robbins, Tex Ritter, and Ernest Tubb all of whom he described as "unique characters."

Roy Acuff lived in a house built for him near the Opry House in his later years. Steve recalled, "During my first seven years as marketing manager, Roy would drop by the Opry office twice a day for a cup of coffee and conversation." Steve described this as a valued experience to hear first-hand stories from a legend in country music. A legend Steve also watched perform on the Opry stage.

Other early artists became friends, stars such as Bill Monroe, Minnie Pearl, and Vince Gill. In fact, Steve proudly recalled facilitating Gill's initial appearance on the Opry stage and to later see him inducted into the Opry family. While supporting many legendary performers, Steve made a concerted effort to promote new artists as a part of his goal to "balance across generations."

In 2010, during the devastating Nashville flood which impacted areas of Nashville along the Cumberland River banks, the Grand Ole Opry House stage and first floor auditorium were submerged. At the onset of the flood, Steve and others of his staff crossed a flood wall walking in wading boots to get to the Opry House. He said they worked quickly to move items from the Opry Museum as well as tape archives to safer heights. "As we worked, we could see through the glass doors that the water was rapidly rising. We subsequently had to be evacuated via a flat bottom boat."

Steve's next priority was to keep the show schedule uninterrupted. He negotiated, virtually overnight, for the Opry performances to be restaged in the War Memorial and Ryman Auditoriums during the six-month, \$20 million restoration of the Opry House.

As previously mentioned, Steve met the requests of two U.S. Presidents to stage Opry performances for special events. George H.W. Bush was a huge fan of country music, and so he chose to kick off the 1990 G7 Summit with a down-home party for world leaders. That party included a performance by the Grand Ole Opry which Steve produced and staged in the Houston Livestock and Rodeo Stadium, a logistical challenge according to Steve.

Legendary stars Bill Monroe, Charlie Pride, Loretta Lynn, Minnie Pearl, and the Gatlin Brothers opened the evening entertainment. Texas-style events such as calf scrambling, barrel races, square dancing, and a barbecue feast followed.

At the request of the Obamas in 2009, Steve brought the Grand Ole Opry to the East Room of the White House. The evening event featured artists Charlie Pride, Brad Paisley, Alison Krauss and Union Station. An additional audience for the day included an afternoon meeting of the artists with Education Secretary Anne Duncan and 120 middle and high school students eager to learn about the craft of songwriting and the genres of country music.

Steve was the executive producer of the Grand Ole Opry's 80TH Anniversary Show at Carnegie Hall in 2005. Country Hall of Fame members, Little Jimmy Dickens and Bill Anderson, to relative newcomers, Brad Paisley and Martina McBride, plus many other legendary artists brought the audience to their feet and in chorale harmony with the final song, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." You can watch the full cast finale by searching online for Grand Ole Opry at Carnegie Hall 2005.

Always looking for new ways to promote interest in the country music scene, Steve envisioned and pitched the TV series, "Nashville." The show featured the music industry and the vexations of fading artists as well as the challenging path for aspiring new artists in the Music City, Nashville. As executive producer of the series, Steve oversaw all aspects of show production while ensuring that the fictional characters and their stories rang true to the Nashville artistic lifestyle.

The original music, written as a part of the tapestry of each story, appealed to a multi-generational audience. The show, first aired in 2012, ran for six seasons, four on the ABC network followed by two additional seasons on CMT, Country Music Television. Steve produced five US and three international concert tours with the "Nashville" cast, venues filled with ardent fans of the show.

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Steve's many accomplishments have been rewarded with honors recognizing his creative passion and his leadership. The awards range from Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management Outstanding Service Award, to the Nashville Kiwanis Club's 2012 Outstanding Nashvillian of the Year, to the Country Music Association (CMA) Irving Waugh Award of Excellence.

He has served as Opry Trust Fund President for twenty years, is a past CMA Board Chairman and was recently re-elected to the Board. He is a member of the Academy of Country Music, the Recording Academy, and the Television Academy. There are more honors I could list, but Steve is not done. No doubt, his work will continue to garner attention and praise.

Retiring from Gaylord Entertainment in 2018, Steve has launched a new company, SteadiBeat Media. He describes his role as producer and consultant for television, music, and live stage. Though still in development, Steve shared a quick preview of one new project. He described a "murder mystery series set in Scotland and using a Scottish writer and co-producer."

He added to SteadiBeat's project plans, "We are in the early stages on a couple of musicals with Broadway aspirations. One is based on a film property and the other is original. Both involve country music."

Asking Steve how Covid has impacted his work, he replied, "It slowed things down in terms of live stage and entertainment development, but it didn't shut it down. Writers were digging in and learning to work more flexibly in a virtual environment." He continued, "We began the Scottish project collaboration before travel restrictions. My producing partner in Scotland and I learned to 'zoom' as well as include supporting staff in Los Angeles in our meetings, a technology allowing us to work across multiple time zones. In a way, Covid helped us learn and utilize new technologies to continue our work."

Steve has seen incredible technological changes over a career beginning in the 1980s to the present. He mentioned the rise of social media as a significant asset in business. "Social media has been an important marketing tool since its inception. It is vital in the promotion of music, a transition for artist exposure from physical products to streaming and finding even larger audiences."

His lifestyle has changed somewhat. He described his new work as "an opportunity to set my schedule, to select my projects, to spend more time with friends, and to travel. Still residing in Nashville, I am also in New York City a lot, and I will travel to South Africa next week."

Steve's career stretches across decades of the entertainment business. He has worked with innumerable famous artists. He has been instrumental in wooing new artists and a new following of country music fans while also honoring and preserving the rich history of country music. His fearless approach to change and his thirst for new creative challenges is very much alive.

The almost two-hour interview Steve granted me flew by. His story is bigger than life. I can't wait to see what he does next!

What a tremendous amount of personal involvement in the entertainment industry from one of our own! When Gordon Fee suggested Steve Buchanan as a potential subject for Benita Albert to pursue, little did I realize just how instrumental he had been and continues to be in a major way. I should have known Gordon would recognize the value of this Historically Speaking series. Thanks Gordon, thanks Benita and most of all, thanks Steve!

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The Buchanan family, from left, Joey, Joel, Jane, and Steve



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