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# Preserving a Cultural Landscape Through Memory: The Quonset Auditorium Legacy<sup>1</sup>

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In the years immediately following World War II (WW II), the recording industry began to boom again after a lapse during the War, and recording artists hit the road to publicize their music and make a living.<sup>2</sup> In response to this upsurge in touring, the roadhouse, defined here by its function rather than as a building type, became both more numerous and important in the American cultural landscape. Many of these roadhouses were well established venues - clubs, auditoriums and theatres - that had served both touring and local artists for years, but new venues also sprang up in response to gaps in tour circuits.

The story of the Quonset Auditorium in Bowling Green, Kentucky (*Figure 1*), illustrates the important role that roadhouses played in the local, regional and national tour circuits of both European-American and African-American musicians and entertainers after WWII, during a time of growth and change in popular music in America. The role of these roadhouses has often been overlooked due to a focus on destination venues such as the Apollo Theatre and the Grand Ole Opry, along with a preoccupation with record sales, discographies and billboard charts. These foci have diverted attention from the



*Figure 1* The Quonset Auditorium circa 1952 when Johnny Maddox and his Rhythm Masters were regular entertainers. Photo courtesy, Joe Marshall.

study of both smaller venues along tour routes and the importance of touring in the careers of entertainers.<sup>3</sup>

Stories about the Quonset Auditorium which I have collected since the year 2000 illustrate how the Quonset Auditorium fits into not only the local and regional tour circuits but also the national tour circuit of the post-WWII era.<sup>4</sup> These stories relate how popular music icons such as the great Ray Charles; the godfather of soul, James Brown; the diva of gospel, Mahalia Jackson; and Grand Ole Opry stars such as Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb, and Bill Monroe have touched the lives of local audiences. While the people I talked with—ranging from musicians who performed at the Quonset; the Quonset's proprietor, concert and event attendees; and people who had been told stories

about the Quonset -- remembered seeing these legendary musicians as the great moments of their youth, they also talked about barn dances, professional wrestling, live bear acts, bootlegging and shootings at the Quonset, recalling events and experiences that seemed to hold an equally strong position in their memories. Even though the Quonset was situated in "Yesterday's Part of Town,"<sup>5</sup> on the once vibrant route of the Dixie Highway the building evokes powerful memories of a past era when both the Quonset Auditorium and the Dixie Highway were the hot spots in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

While I was first drawn to study the Quonset Auditorium because of its association with famous musicians, my interest in it grew stronger as I realized that the local experiences of the Quonset were important in the contexts of post-WWII popular music and the Civil Rights Movement. Even though the auditorium closed over 45 years ago, stories of events that took place there are still told and in their telling, the memory of the Quonset Auditorium is preserved, re-created and kept alive. This preservation of memories is relevant not only to the local people who personally experienced "The Most Happening Place in Town,"<sup>6</sup> but is also important nationally because these memories represent a public history of a distinctive era, post-WWII, when popular music was booming, dance halls were crammed and segregation began to loosen. During my primary documentary research, the building was still standing in its original location. Since that time, the Quonset auditorium has been demolished. Now, the oral histories that document peoples' experiences of the place are even

more important, since the physical structure no longer stands to trigger memories and keep them alive.

### **Historical Summary**

The Quonset Auditorium stood on the Dixie Highway halfway between Nashville and Louisville in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Between 1947 and 1959 it was known as the "Most Happening Place in Town" while it served as a roadhouse used by touring Rhythm and Blues (R&B), Country, Pop and Gospel musicians, as well as local entertainers. Many great artists including Little Richard, James Brown, Ray Charles, Hank Snow, Pee Wee King, Bill Monroe, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Mahalia Jackson graced the Quonset's small stage regularly over the years. Although it is best remembered as a music venue, the Quonset was also a main stop on the professional wrestling circuit. Legends such as Andre the Giant, Gorgeous George, Roy Welch and Ginger the Wrestling Bear were among the professional wrestlers of the 1940s and 1950s who competed in matches at the Quonset Auditorium while on tour with the National Wrestling Alliance. The Auditorium also provided the local Bowling Green community with space for roller skating, church services, barn dances, and private parties.

Three members of the legendary Bowling Green band, "Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers," brothers Joe and Kenny Marshall and Floyd Dunn, were responsible for building the Quonset Auditorium. The Rovin' Ramblers got their start in 1941 on Bowling Green's first local radio station, WLBK, where they build up a strong local following. They began to build the Quonset in 1947 as a business venture after Bowling

Green's National Guard Armory, which had housed both their shows and performances by other recording artists, burned down.<sup>7</sup>

The Quonset Auditorium was named after its architectural type known as a "Quonset Hut," although it is technically a steel arch-rib utility building, the larger version of the hut.<sup>8</sup> During WWII, the military manufactured 170,000 of these pre-fabricated buildings made of arched steel rib braces and covered with corrugated sheet metal. The name Quonset derives from a Navy base in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, where the huts were manufactured. After the war, the military sold them as surplus items on the civilian market and the Rovin' Ramblers bought one, as Marshall recalls, because "they were pre-fab buildings, you could put them up quick."<sup>9</sup> Since they entered distribution on the civilian market, Quonset Huts have been in vernacular use as auditoriums, barns, churches, school houses, skating rinks, dormitories, homes and much more. With a steel structure proven to be resistant to decay over time and a metal shell that could be easily patched, they have persisted on the built landscape because they are so durable. The major threat to the preservation of Quonset Huts is the perception that they are eyesores. Not only are they aesthetically unappealing, but many people also think of them as cheap, expediently constructed buildings never meant to be permanent structures. In Anchorage Alaska, where Quonset Huts were very prominent after WWII, the local government has issued an ordinance restricting owners from repairing or improving them. This legislation works as a way to remove the building type from Anchorage's cultural

landscape because they do not fit the image the city is trying to project of itself. The removal of Quonset Huts from the Anchorage city landscape illustrates the disdain many Americans hold for the building type. The dominant perception is these buildings have low capital value and were meant to be discarded by the military once they were no longer needed.<sup>10</sup> Inexpensive, commonplace, aesthetically unappealing and without prestige, most people reason that Quonset Huts are not worthy of preservation.

Until its recent destruction, the Quonset Auditorium in Bowling Green, Kentucky served as a tangible example of the vernacular use of the military-built Quonset Hut. Here, the basic structure was embellished with a false front covered by a faux cut-stone veneer and an inset Art Moderne glass block entryway. In the Quonset's heyday, people recognized these features as the marks of modern roadside architecture, typical of the buildings, such as diners and motor courts that sprang up along travel routes.<sup>11</sup> Both the Quonset Auditorium's embellishments and its prime location on the Dixie Highway -- at the time the only throughway between Nashville and Louisville -- marked it as a roadside attraction, while these combined with the large size of the venue -- 700 seats or standing room for 1000 -- to contribute to its success. In addition to the Ramblers' regular concerts, the venue was soon booking a variety of large acts from out of town, including Country, R&B, and Gospel stars, and serving as a roadhouse for both touring musicians and local entertainment. These bookings continued until it closed in 1959. *Figure 2* shows an



Figure 2 "Grand Ole Opry Star Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys at the Quonset Auditorium plus Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers of WKCT." Park City Daily News 02/02/1948. This was one of the last performances of Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs with Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys.

advertisement for one of the first big shows at the Quonset; one that took place a month after it opened. This blockbuster included Bill Monroe with his classic band; Bradley Kincaid, one of the first Country music radio stars from station WLS in Chicago; and Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers, the local radio presence kicking off the show. In retrospect, this event is significant in the history of Bluegrass music because it was one of the last performances of Bill Monroe with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs as

members of his Blue Grass Boys. About a week before the date they performed at the Quonset, Flatt and Scruggs gave their two-week notice to Monroe.<sup>12</sup>

Local radio played a role in the success of the Quonset Auditorium as well. The Rovin' Ramblers hosted a daily radio show on Bowling Green's station WLBJ while the Quonset Auditorium was in operation, as they had since 1941 (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers, with Jerry the Bear, WKCT Bowling Green, KY, circa 1947. Publicity postcard courtesy, WKCT.

During their broadcast, the Ramblers performed live and took the opportunity to announce both their performance schedule and the headlining recording artists whom they booked at the Quonset. Although local radio played a role in the success of the auditorium, it was also a factor contributing to its closure in 1959. This had to do with a shift in popularity from radio to television in the mid 1950s, rendering obsolete the promotional network that the Ramblers and many other musical groups had developed with live radio performances and show announcements. In addition, popular recording artists began to perform only at large destination venues and dropped the smaller

roadhouses from their tour circuits because they could reach audiences in smaller towns through television. These developments coincided with the construction of the interstate highway system, which re-directed touring musicians away from the city centers of many towns and further encouraged them to cut roadhouses from their tour routes.

**On the Dixie Bee Line:<sup>13</sup>  
The Dixie Highway Linking the North and South**

As mentioned above, the Quonset Auditorium's location on the Dixie Highway made it convenient for touring musicians and entertainers and contributed to its success. The Quonset was located at a major intersection on the north edge of Bowling Green along U.S. 31-W, the western route of the Dixie Highway. From the time this route was dedicated in 1920, until 1965, when Interstate 65 came through, the Dixie Highway was the only travel corridor linking the north and south in western Kentucky (*Figure 4*).<sup>14</sup>

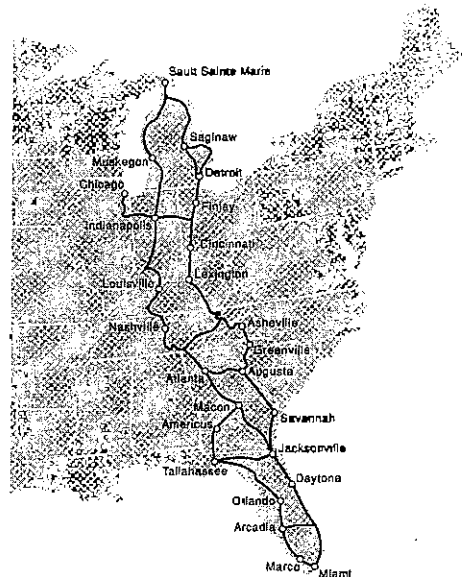
By the end of WWII, when commercial music was booming and



*Figure 4 Aerial view of the Quonset Auditorium, at the crossroads of the Dixie Highway (crossing the Barren River) and the U.S. 31 W Bypass. The Quonset Auditorium is the larger of the two arched buildings. Courtesy, Kenny Bale.*

the Quonset was built, the national road network was well established. Without this highway network, musicians would not have been able to provide many audiences with live performances of their favorite tunes heard on the radio, and the folk culture of touring would not have developed as it did.

It was no accident that the Quonset Auditorium was so well situated on this major thoroughway in Kentucky linking the north and south. Joe Marshall, builder and proprietor of the auditorium, and wrestling promoter Bob Randall, who wanted to book matches at the new venue, scouted the city by airplane looking for properties that were vacant and well positioned for public access. They chose to place the Quonset along the well-traveled Dixie Highway, and in a part of Bowling Green accessible to both the African American and European American communities (*Figure 5*).<sup>15</sup>



*Figure 5 Map of the Dixie Highway, Eastern and Western Routes circa 1926. Adapted from Preston 1991:57.*

As a roadhouse, the Quonset was well positioned between major music destinations such as Louisville, Nashville, Atlanta and Memphis. All of these cities were centers for R&B music, and Nashville was developing as "Country Music USA," building on the popularity of the WSM Grand Ole Opry radio broadcasts of live shows from Nashville. Both Louisville and Nashville, each within a three-hour drive of the Quonset Auditorium, were travel hubs with connections to other destinations, and themselves major centers for music.

The history of the popular music business has tended to focus on the major hubs such as Memphis, Nashville, Chicago and New York, but the small towns and venues that were booked in between major centers were also important. They provided extra income that helped offset musicians' costs of travel (gas, food and lodging) and allowed the residents of small communities access to their favorite recording artists, which in turn boosted record sales. The freedom of motor travel, as opposed to railways, was important for the early touring industry, as it allowed musicians to customize their routes to their audience base and to access small communities off the main route.<sup>16</sup> Taking advantage of the Quonset Auditorium's prime position on the Dixie Highway, the Marshall Brothers set up a fruit wholesale outlet beside the building. They also found that their restaurant in the front portion of the auditorium became a popular stop for highway travelers, and eventually they kept it open 24 hours a day.

### **Big Names in Small Places: Touring the Dixie Highway**

By the time the Quonset Auditorium opened its doors in 1947, the record industry had found an increased market with African Americans who had migrated north after WWII to find work in industrial cities. At the same time, Country music was surging in popularity partly due to exposure it had received during the war through USO tours and the Camel Caravan,<sup>17</sup> and partly due to nostalgia for the old Southern country life.<sup>18</sup> Through this expansion, the "race" and "hillbilly" music that was becoming popular in the 1920s grew into the genres of R&B and Country music in the post-WWII years. This is where the story of the Quonset Auditorium begins, with the establishment of new music genres -- Country and R&B -- and an associated boom in recording and touring.

Two main tour circuits brought popular radio and recording artists through Bowling Green and to the Quonset Auditorium. These are the "Chitlin Circuit,"<sup>19</sup> a network of black theaters and clubs, and the Country Circuit, a network of white schoolhouses, auditoriums and theaters. While these tour circuits had been developing since the 1920s, they really boomed after WWII when the recording industry targeted the popular market. Not only did shows on these circuits utilize different booking agents and promotion networks, but they also often had access to different venues because of the racial segregation of public places that was the norm at the time. Although the Quonset Auditorium served as a venue for both the "Chitlin" and the Country circuits, the advertising avenues available for black shows and white

shows at the Quonset Auditorium reflected the differences between the tour circuits. Country promoters had access to Bowling Green radio stations WLBJ and WKCT as well as The Park City Daily News to announce upcoming dates for the Quonset Auditorium and to access their audience base, which was primarily white. Because Bowling Green did not have a black paper or radio station, these avenues of advertisement were not available for R&B promoters, and they relied primarily on the distribution of revue placards to get the word out to the black community.


Although tour and promotional networks in the post-WWII era were generally separated along racial lines, the Quonset Auditorium provided a crossroads where these two music networks met. This was possible because the Quonset Auditorium stood at the edge of Shake Rag, a longstanding African American neighborhood in Bowling Green, and because the auditorium owners were willing to rent to African Americans. The location of the Quonset Auditorium at a place between black and white cultural landscapes allowed for the interaction of these groups at the edge of their territories, and this helped change the cultural landscape from one of strict racial division to one of racial mixture.

### The Country Circuit

The Quonset Auditorium hosted Country artists of national, regional and local notoriety. Grand Old Opry and Country stars who performed at the Quonset Auditorium include Ernest Tubb, Wally Fowler and the Oakridge Quartet (later the Oakridge Boys), Cowboy Copas, Paul Howard, Pee Wee King and the Golden West

Cowboys, Clayton McMichen, Johnny Maddox, Hank Snow, Howdy Forrester, Milton Estes with the Martha White Flour tour, The Jordanares, Bill Monroe and others (Figures 6-8).

**Coming**



**Paul Howard**  
And His  
**Grand Ole Opry Gang**

TOPS IN ENTERTAINMENT

**GRAND OLE OPRY**

WORLD'S GREATEST RADIO PROGRAM

Station **WSM**  
Nashville

**Paul Howard**  
and his  
American Cotton Pickers  
Columbia Recording Stars of the  
Nation's Hit Tunes.

- BUDDIE HORNER on Piano.
- BILLY—The King of Steel  
Guitar.
- ELMER SPARKS—The Fun  
and Frolic Boy.
- THE GOSPEL FOUR, Sacred  
Songs.
- JUNIOR and JABBO, The  
Boogie Boys.
- RAGTIME CHARLIE, Ken-  
tucky Fiddling Champion.
- THE BABY COTTON  
PICKER.

FUN—FROLIC—MUSIC

Also  
**JOE MARSHALL**  
AND HIS  
**ROVIN RAMBLERS**  
of WKCT

**FRI., MAR. 26**  
**The Quonset**  
50c and 75c. tax included

Figure 6 "WSM Paul Howard and his Grand Ole Opry Gang also Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers of WKCT." Park City Daily News 03/21, 23, 24/1948:11



Station **WSM** Nashville,  
Presents  
**GRAND OLE OPRY**  
Star  
**BILL MONROE**  
and his  
**BLUE GRASS BOYS**  
Plus  
**THE BLUE GRASS QUARTET**  
ALSO  
**Shanandoah Valley Trio**  
AND  
THE SOUTH'S FUNNIEST COMEDY TEAM  
"Shuffy" And "Buckeye Sneezleweed"  
AT  
**THE QUONSET**  
**WEDNESDAY, JAN. 19th**  
DOORS OPEN 7 P. M. SHOW 8 P. M.  
ADMISSION—ADULTS 75c CHILDREN 50c Tax Incl.  
**Tops in Entertainment**

Figure 7 "WSM Presents Grand Ole Opry Star Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys at the Quonset Auditorium plus Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers of WKCT." Park City Daily News 02/02/1948

Locally and regionally known Country performers also played at the roadhouse so that the Quonset represents a crossroads where these levels of the Country music tour circuit intersected. For the Grand Ole Opry stars it was a fill-in venue used to make a few extra dollars while passing through Bowling Green on the way back to Nashville and the Opry. For lesser known acts, the Quonset was a large venue that provided them with exposure and income.

Local radio played a major role in the success of the Quonset Auditorium on this circuit. During Joe Marshall and his Rovin'

Ramblers' daily radio broadcast, Joe took the opportunity to announce both his band's performance schedule and the headlining recording artists they had booked at the Quonset Auditorium. Not only did this serve to promote the Rovin' Ramblers and other acts performing at the Quonset, but also helped secure bookings. When the opportunity presented itself, Marshall would bring the recording stars who were touring through Bowling Green onto the radio show, so they could plug their recordings and concerts on air.<sup>20</sup>

In Hatch Show Print, a book about the Nashville poster company most Country musicians used to promote their shows, Jim Sherraden, Elek Horvath and Paul Kingsbury write that "local radio stations did their part establishing artist service bureaus to facilitate booking and promoting. Advance men adapted the time-honored tactics of front men for minstrel shows, distributing show posters and handbills as well as arranging radio and newspaper ads and coverage."<sup>21</sup> Joe Marshall's role as both a regional showman and venue promoter provides us with a concrete example of Sheridan and his co-authors' observation. Both Joe Marshall and the Quonset Auditorium were part of a promotional trend that brought local and national commercial music networks together and incorporated them into the folk culture of touring. As Joe Marshall recently recalled, "I played a lot of shows with Bill Monroe. He came here [to the Quonset] several times. And we would go other places and book together. I would book him. ...he used our publicity from this station [WKCT] and we got a little money.... I've introduced him many times on the stage."<sup>22</sup>

**The "Chitlin" Circuit in Bowling Green: "Rhythm and Blues, Baby, Rhythm and Blues"<sup>23</sup>**

At the same time it was a venue for national, regional and local Country music performers, the Quonset Auditorium also became a roadhouse for locally and nationally known R&B, Gospel, and Rock & Roll musicians. The venue entered the "Chitlin' Circuit," a loose network of black theaters and clubs, very soon after it opened, and became the first club in Bowling Green open to both white and black clientele. In hindsight this can be seen as a groundbreaking event during the Jim Crow era.<sup>24</sup> Opening the auditorium to blacks as well as whites took place as Upton Roundtree, a local black promoter, approached Joe Marshall about booking big acts at the Quonset that his local black club could not accommodate. As Marshall recalled, "...it was open for anybody. If you had 25 dollars you could rent the Quonset one night and have what you wanted to have."<sup>25</sup>

It was not long before the Quonset was known as a hot spot for R&B, Gospel, and in its later years Rock-and-Roll, hosting the likes of Little Richard and Chuck Berry. In addition to these, some of the famous musicians touring the "Chitlin Circuit" who performed at the Quonset Auditorium include Ray Charles, T-Bone Walker, BB King, James Brown, Jimmy Liggins, Joe Turner, Lloyd Price, Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and many others. This list of musicians indicates the wide variety of black music styles heard at the Quonset. Many of these artists outgrew the venue over the building's life span. While B.B. King's talent and fame moved him to venues beyond the

- 2 -

GREAT SHOWS

FIRST SHOW,  
**2:30 P. M.**

SECOND SHOW  
**8:30 P. M.**

★

**SUNDAY  
NOV. 7**

★

At The

**QUONSET**

25 outstanding singers  
and several quartets. Be  
here the main great thing  
has.

**DON'T DARE MISS IT!**

Figure 8 "Grand Ole Opry star Wally Fowler and his famous Oak Ridge Quartet." Park City Daily News 11/03, 05, 07/1948:8

Quonset in the mid 1950s (Figure 9), others who were just breaking into the recording and touring scene continued to play there. Bookings at the Quonset Auditorium included both recording stars and local African-American bands performing on their own.

This variety in bookings made the Quonset and the "Chitlin' Circuit" a crossroads where local black musicians could perform with seasoned recording artists. Saxophonist Robert Phillips and William "Guitar" Foster, now local Bowling Green legends, had their own band called the "House Rockers," and they got a break sitting in with many of the big name recording artists as they toured



Figure 9 BB King in Houston, circa late 1950s. Courtesy William Ferris Collection, University of Mississippi.

through the area. They even got the opportunity to tour on the local “Chitlin’ Circuit” with some of the stars. Robert Phillips describes how this developed: “[The House Rockers] were drawing some people, we were drawing good crowds. So...[Roundtree, the promoter] started having us play behind the... recording artists... ...Roundtree was booking and, if you can catch the artist between Nashville and Louisville...they would come cheaper you know...[We] Made it comfortable for them to play. And we played, we were fill-ins. He kept us pretty busy then. Sometimes he would book us, well like Bobby Blue Bland and B.B. King, James Brown,...Lloyd Price..... We would maybe go from here to Clarksville to Hopkinsville to Madisonville and all around little, little circle with them. ...the recording artists were all on their way up. So they would come maybe sometimes twice a month..., it’s not like now that they have big stars that you see them once a year, or whatever. ...[with the] big artist,

you know...they would...send the songs they wanted us to learn [on a record] and...couple weeks here and we’d learn them.... Well, the people that we know... never had any complaints. Because we had some pretty good musicians...it didn’t take us long to catch on.”<sup>26</sup>

While Phillips never broke out of the local “Chitlin’ Circuit,” he recalls “I would have been going along, you know, with somebody, but I had just got married and, uh, that’s the only thing got, saved me from being all over the place.” Until recently, Phillips performed when he could with Mary Ann Fisher, a Kentucky native who he first met when she performed at the Quonset Auditorium with Ray Charles. Fisher (*Figure 10*), dubbed the “Songbird of the South,” toured the country as Ray Charles’ lead female vocalist between 1955 and 1958. Charles hired Fisher after hearing her sing at a club in Fort Knox, another roadhouse on the Dixie



Figure 10 Mary Ann Fisher. March 2003 in Louisville, Kentucky. Photo by the author.

Highway circuit.<sup>27</sup> Fisher passed away recently, and I feel lucky to have documented some of her experiences of touring during the first boom of R&B.

Just as Fisher got her break through her presence on the local "Chitlin' Circuit," Guitar Foster also broke out of the local tour circuit through his fill-in work at the Quonset Auditorium and toured professionally with recording stars such as Joe and Jimmy Liggins, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, BB King, Guitar Slim and others. He was featured on his own and billed as "Guitar Foster" at the Royal Peacock Club in Atlanta as an opening act for the touring stars until he was drafted into the army in the mid 1950s. The experiences of Robert Phillips, Mary Ann Fisher and William "Guitar" Foster illustrate how both the Quonset and the "Chitlin' Circuit" provided a point of intersection and exchange for both the local and national popular music scenes.

Stories from the Quonset Auditorium illustrate Kentucky's part in significant national music and socio-cultural trends emerging after WWII. The careers of famous R&B musicians such as B.B. King, James Brown and Little Richard flourished, for example, because of this network of local musicians who filled in for their regular bands which were too expensive to bring on the road. The Quonset's story illustrates the contribution of local musicians such as Robert Phillips, William "Guitar" Foster and Mary Ann Fisher to the careers of these major recording artists. Stories about the Quonset as a venue on the country circuit illustrate the role of local radio stations such as Bowling Green's WKCT and local

radio personalities such as Joe Marshall in the tour circuits of country music stars.

### **Cultural Crossroads: Music Breaking Down Barriers**

The Quonset Auditorium also fits into the story of the civil rights movement on local and national levels. As the first music venue that bridged the gap between the black and white communities in Bowling Green, the Quonset provided a venue where these communities could interact and where popular and influential musicians in the Civil Rights movement performed. In the post-WWII era, racism in the south was beginning to be challenged, and this challenge came in part through the popularization of black music. As Wade Daniel has written, "in southern cities, musicians and athletes often did more to undermine segregation than community leaders."<sup>28</sup> Many black recording artists used their popularity with both whites and blacks to take a stance against segregation. As Mary Ann Fisher recalls of Ray Charles, "If our people couldn't sit there...and hear him play, he didn't play."<sup>29</sup> Both black and white audiences had access to the Quonset Auditorium due to its location at the boundary of Shake Rag, a longstanding African-American neighborhood that was thriving with music and entertainment in the 40s and 50s. Though not run by African Americans, the Quonset booked black acts and was the largest venue in Bowling Green that was part of the "Chitlin' Circuit."

Geraldine Banks, the daughter of local promoter Walter Bird, grew up at the center of one of the juke joint strips on Center Street. She

recalls that “entertainment was big in Shake Rag. It was big...on any given night. You could come down here and there would be people everywhere. You know. This is where all the blacks just hung out. ... If you wanted to bar hop you could walk to club to club to club to club... And I think by having big time entertainment coming through here it kind of made us a little famous. You know, at one time I think Shake Rag was comparable, probably entertainment wise, to a little Harlem or something like that. It was big!”<sup>30</sup> A crowd of 300 people could arrive at the Quonset Auditorium, which had become the largest venue on Bowling Green’s “Chitlin’ Circuit,” by walking just a few blocks from Shake Rag.

The Quonset’s proximity to this neighborhood was also a convenience for black musicians on tour. Before the Civil Rights Act was signed in 1964, black musicians on the road often had a hard time finding accommodation and restaurants. Black recording artists touring the Dixie Highway came to rely on the comfortable accommodation and restaurants available to African Americans in Shake Rag, and this also helped draw bookings for the Quonset Auditorium. Rooming houses had sprung up in Shake Rag along the route of the Dixie Highway after it was dedicated in 1920 in order to serve African American travelers.<sup>31</sup> William “Guitar” Foster recalled that the Southern Queen Hotel (*Figure 11*), located just a block from the Quonset Auditorium, “was a big hotel down on Second Avenue and State. And I guess it was from Louisville to Nashville, there wasn’t anything compared to it. For minority, wasn’t nothing compared to it. I don’t care how much money



*Figure 11 The Southern Queen Hotel an African-American roominghouse at Second and State Streets in Shake Rag neighborhood, Bowling Green, Kentucky. This hotel was frequented by touring black musicians until desegregation after 1964. Photo by Wendy Wheatcraft.*

you had. You couldn’t stay at the Helm Hotel [in downtown Bowling Green], I don’t care what money you had.”<sup>32</sup> Musicians such as Lloyd Price, Ike and Tina Turner, Bobby Bland, James Brown, Ray Charles and others stayed at the Southern Queen Hotel. They enjoyed the hospitality, had easy access to black restaurants and services, and often played ball across the street in the park with the local kids.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Quonset Auditorium was open to both races, it was still a segregated venue. As Marshall describes, “When we rented it to the black people, we had a side entrance for them (*Figure 12*). And the door was closed at the restaurant. They didn’t come in our restaurant, in our office, the front part at all.”<sup>34</sup> Marshall also recalls the appeal of popular black music with European Americans: “Now you saw the little balcony upstairs...a lot of white people would come and buy a ticket and go up there and lean over the rail to watch them dance. That was a good show! [laughing] I spent a lot of time up there, too, with them.... [in a low voice] The music was good, of course.”<sup>35</sup>



Figure 12 Side entrance for African-Americans at the Quonset Auditorium that bypasses the restaurant at the front of the building. Photo by the author.

Robert Phillips recalls that over time, segregation at the Quonset Auditorium became less rigid. He remembers, "...several times there was blacks on one side and whites on the other downstairs.... Well they finally outgrew that so they started coming down. You know, as it got more familiar, I guess with, different people out there."<sup>36</sup> Memories about the Quonset Auditorium such as this reflect the role of music and entertainment in breaking down racial division, and are an important addition to the historical record. By linking popular music and the civil rights movement we can see that the vernacular development of a network of roadhouses open to blacks and whites, such as the Quonset Auditorium, aided the move towards racial integration.

Not only was the Quonset Auditorium one of the first segregated, as opposed to racially separate, music venues in Bowling Green, but the Quonset's band also became the first integrated band in Bowling Green. This band, billed as "The Quonset's new dance band" included the Rovin Ramblers,

who were white, as well as black musicians from the House Rockers and The Bob Henley Band (Figure 13).

Interestingly, I learned about the Quonset's integrated band almost by accident. As Bobby Green, a member of the Rovin' Ramblers, and I looked the photograph shown



Figure 13 The Quonset's New (and Integrated) Band, after the Quonset reopened after renovations in 1951. On the far left crouched behind the bandstand is one of the African-American members of the band. Proceeding from left to right is Bob Green, Ralph Stevens, Harry DuPuy, Joe Marshall (standing) and Connolly?. Photo courtesy, Joe Marshall.

in Figure 13, and as he identified the band members, he recalled that the Quonset's new dance band had included African Americans. No other informants, black or white, had offered this information on their own, and I doubt that if Green's memory had not been triggered by the photo I would have found out about the Quonset's integrated band. Neil Rosenberg has written, "As is so often the case with oral history relating to sensitive events, what is unsaid is as important as what is said."<sup>37</sup> The stories collected for this study represent different experiences and perceptions of the past. Because the Quonset Auditorium operated during the Jim Crow era, discussing racial interaction might have been a

difficult subject for my informants as some of the emotions and sentiments from this time of conflict and change still linger. Unresolved sentiment helps explain why some informants have chosen to avoid talking about race relations at the Quonset Auditorium. The subjective nature of memory has contributed to selectivity in choosing what to share with a researcher such as myself.

### Conclusion: Preservation Issues

By 2002 the Quonset Auditorium was at a critical point, and the future of the building was in question.<sup>38</sup> I had heard rumors that the Bowling Green Municipal Utilities company wanted to purchase the property for the expansion of a municipal water treatment facility and while interested in the land, they were not interested in the building. The landowner at the time, Kenny Bale, who had operated his tire business from the building since 1959, expressed an interest in the history of the building but had repeatedly refused to allow it to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. While this did not bode well for the Quonset's preservation, there was a glimmer of hope that it might be saved because the building was within the official gateway to a new park being developed by the city along the Barren River. I was hopeful that the Quonset Auditorium would be preserved and incorporated into the park as a heritage tourism attraction.

When Bowling Green Municipal Utilities bought the property and announced their plan for the demolition of the Quonset building in the summer of 2003, a significant preservation effort was launched to



Figure 14 Front entrance to the Quonset Auditorium. Ticket window on the left. Photo by the author.

save it. Numerous articles about the significance of the building appeared in the local newspaper, the Bowling Green Daily News, and on local television. The Quonset Auditorium was entered onto Preservation Kentucky's "Most Endangered List"<sup>39</sup> and I fielded frequent calls and requests from preservationists for my documentary materials about the history of the building, which I gave freely.

The building had been altered very little over the years and still retained the architectural features that linked it to its history of use. For example, the ticket window (Figure 14) and the rectangular addition (see Figure 4) to accommodate bleachers for viewing professional wrestling matches were physical reminders of the Quonset's roadhouse era. The architecture of segregation was also extant with both the modest side entrance for African Americans that bypassed the restaurant at the front of the building (see Figure 12) and the balcony area used by whites to watch black acts surviving.

The building had served as a metonym in that its presence on the landscape had the power to evoke personal experiences as

well as public history. Dolores Hayden has written about the use of place memory by educators and museums, observing that "...places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present."<sup>40</sup>

The importance of ordinary buildings like the inexpensive Quonset Hut discussed here has often been ignored by public memory. Despite such buildings' power to visually evoke social memory -- the same power as monumental architecture -- they are often destroyed. Although the Quonset Auditorium itself would have been the best teaching tool and reminder of the past, oral histories -- accompanied by the few mementos and photographs of the venue that survive -- can be used by educators, public historians, and public interpreters to keep the local and nationally significant history of the structure alive so the public can learn from it. Even before the demolition of the Quonset Auditorium on October 16, 2003, I had worked with the Kentucky Museum to prepare a teaching kit that utilizes the history of the building to teach about local and national social history.<sup>41</sup>

While the political will to preserve the Quonset Auditorium was not present, measures to compensate for its loss have been promised by the property owner, Bowling Green Municipal Utilities. These compensatory offerings include installing a plaque and a miniature model of the building at the place where it once stood. The company has also contributed \$3,000 toward the publication of a book about the

Quonset Auditorium by the Bowling Green Landmark Association, and \$1,500 toward a documentary film project about the building. These amounts will cover roughly 12 percent of the costs of these projects.

As is so often the case, only with the loss of the Quonset Auditorium did most people begin to realize its importance, its place in the cultural landscape and the politics involved in historic preservation. I am saddened that the building was not preserved, but glad that my efforts to document the oral histories of the Quonset Auditorium can be used to help keep the memories and history of this significant place alive. Oral histories of the Quonset Auditorium and the memories surrounding it represent a diverse array of experiences of the place. Through these narratives we can learn about the role the Quonset played as a roadhouse on the regular tour routes of recording artists in the post-WWII era. The vernacular network of roadhouses of which the Quonset Auditorium was part have received little detailed attention in literature about commercial music; memories of performances at the Quonset Auditorium provide details that fill in the generalizations often made about roadhouses and touring. The history of the Quonset Auditorium also has links to auto tourism, the civil rights movement, and professional wrestling. As we have seen, the Quonset Auditorium's location on the route of the Dixie Highway, half way between the major music and entertainment centers of Nashville and Louisville, as well as its position at the edge of a black neighborhood in Bowling Green, contributed to its accessibility and popularity.



Through examining the cultural landscape, and by documenting memories and experiences of place, we can come to a fuller understanding of memory from the Quonset Auditorium and can help preserve experiences of the place from which others can also learn.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to Mary Ann Fisher, William "Guitar" Foster, and the memory of the Quonset Auditorium.

<sup>2</sup> Kip Lornell, *Introducing American Folk Music*. (New York: McGraw-Hill College, 1993); Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, [1968] 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Although the focus of my research has been the Quonset's role as a roadhouse for musicians, it also played a significant role in the professional wrestling tour circuit during the post-World War II era. Wrestling is another overlooked entertainment trend that emerged strongly after World War II, and there is a rich history, waiting to be documented, in memories of professional wrestling at the Quonset Auditorium.

<sup>4</sup> I first began to document oral histories about the Quonset Auditorium in 2000 as I gathered information for a National Register nomination about the venue for a vernacular architecture class at Western Kentucky University. Since that time, I have collected over thirty interviews from a variety of individuals who remember the place. These interviews, including transcripts, are archived at the Folklife Archives, Kentucky Building, Department of Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky and are accessible to the public. Leads from the interviews pointed me toward historical documents relating to the Quonset Auditorium, including yearbooks, newspapers and ledgers from show poster companies. [See Bowling Green Business University Yearbooks from 1953, 1954, 1955 available at the Western Kentucky University Archives, Kentucky Building, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky; Newspaper advertisements from the Park City Daily News, Bowling Green, Kentucky from 1947-1959 (See Appendix C in Ridington, 2002 for a full list); Hatch Show Print records archived at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee.] I integrated all of this information into my M.A. Thesis about the venue: Amber Ridington, "At the Crossroads: Commercial Music and Community Experience: The Quonset Auditorium - A Roadhouse on the Dixie Highway." (M.A. Thesis, Department of Modern Languages and Intercultural Studies, Western Kentucky University. Bowling Green, Kentucky: Western Kentucky University, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> This term is a lyric from the song "By Pass Row" by Tommy Johnson (Neron Records, Hartsville, Tennessee). Johnson recorded this song on his own record label during the