



Notes from Music City

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In February 1960, African-American students from four historic Black colleges sat down at segregated lunch counters in downtown Nashville, proclaiming their right to be served and demanding that the city government open the facilities to them. White mobs attacked the young people whom police did not protect, belying Nashville’s image as the Athens of the South. Yet only 3 months later, White store owners capitulated and opened lunch counters to Black customers. As the students celebrated a major victory, the ramparts of Jim Crow crumbled, and Nashville led the South in desegregating restaurants, stores, and public facilities.

Yet 60 years later, the extreme patterns of zoned consumption and racial segregation that have long characterized the city remain on full display. Although Jim Crow is formally dead, downtown is whiter than ever. Steel-and-glass skyscrapers loom over downtown, where they have popped up like mushrooms over the last fifteen years, and construction cranes interrupt the skyline in every direction. Rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods have fueled one of the hottest real estate markets in the country. The retailers targeted by protesters—Woolworths,¹ Kress, McClellan, Cain-Strauss and Harvey—are gone, and the country music industry has taken over the city center, ruling Nashville’s economy with a whopping \$10 billion annual contribution. Even though the country genre is more complex than many realize, marketing distinctions from the Jim Crow-era still persist in more subtle forms today. For example, in the early twentieth century, folk music played by Whites was labeled as “country music,” whereas current genres, such as blues, gospel and rhythm and blues, performed by African-Americans were labeled as “race music.”

Music venues cater to white tourists along Lower Broadway, where the mournful wails of musicians romanticize rural lifestyles and a rustic past. Stores trafficking in rural nostalgia hawk cowboy boots and hats. Fair-skinned bachelorettes on a fast track to the upper middle-class clutch drinks and mug to passersby from atop party busses and pedal taverns that troll the

¹There is a redesigned Woolworths bar/restaurant on the location now, part of a small wave of gentrification-meets-civil-rights-tourism businesses that highlight part of the city’s racial history in order to capture additional niche markets, disarm criticism, and celebrate certain aspects of racial progress.

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urban streets. Groups of revelers stagger along the sidewalks under bright neon signs in the afternoons and evenings, as they hop from one crowded scene to another. The Country Music Hall of Fame and the Ryman auditorium—the Mother Church of Country Music—are a couple of blocks from one another. The extreme makeover of downtown has razed evidence of earlier civil rights struggles, and the municipal government has done little to memorialize one of the most transformative periods in the city’s history.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has dealt a blow to this emporium of white consumption, forcing the bars to temporarily close and silencing live music until a premature reopening began a few weeks later, but the virus has hit Black and Latinx residents hardest. Cleaners, bouncers, construction workers, dishwashers, and other low-wage workers in this predominantly white tourist district are often people of color. Moreover, Blacks make up only 13% of the metropolitan Nashville population but account for nearly half of the Covid-19 deaths, according to metro pandemic task force chair Dr. Alex Jahangir. Similarly, a Vanderbilt University Medical School study found that at least 31% of virus positive residents in Nashville are Hispanic,² who comprise only 10% of the population. The May 25th murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman underscores the fragility of Black and Brown lives. Floyd’s killing and the subsequent murders of Breonna Taylor in Kentucky and Rayshard Brooks and Ahmaud Arbury in Georgia have rubbed salt into the unhealed wounds of Black Nashvillians, after police shot African-American men in the back in 2017 and 2018 and killed them. Although a civilian oversight board of the metropolitan police force emerged from these tragedies, the police chief’s refusal to cooperate has hampered its effectiveness, and the mayor’s office has never forced the matter.

Not surprisingly, large and small protests erupted after Floyd’s murder.



² Holly Fletcher 2020 Initial Covid Testing Data Show Impact on Nashville’s Minority Communities. <http://news.vumc.org/2020/06/17>

Although outcries over police killings have happened in the past, a concatenation of recent events has generated a perfect storm that fuels the scope and intensity of current demonstrations. African-Americans and other minorities not only shoulder the brunt of Covid-19. They are also disproportionately represented among the ranks of both “essential workers,” who risk infection because they cannot work from home, and the unemployed, whose numbers have skyrocketed because of the virus-related shutdown and ensuing recession.



In addition, President Trump’s intensifying racist tweets and his administration’s inability and apparent unwillingness to confront the intertwined health and economic crises have added insult to injury. “Fuck Trump” graffiti appeared on the old Nashville court house, after it was sacked during one of the first downtown demonstrations.

Protests have taken place in Nashville, as well as many small towns and cities in Tennessee, where fewer African-Americans live. On June 4th, 15,000 demonstrators, mostly wearing masks, flooded downtown to demand racial justice, an end to police violence, and the defunding of the force amid rising numbers of Covid-19 cases.



Led by African-Americans and organized by six teenage girls who met on Twitter, the multiracial crowd of all ages was mostly young, white, and educated. Riot police armed to the teeth greeted them as they marched up Lower Broadway through the center of the city. Activists shouted “No Justice, No Peace, Prosecute the Police” and taunted them with chants of “All dressed up in riot gear, but there’s no riot here.” Some of the signs read “Take Your Knee off My Neck America,” “Racism is a Pandemic,” “Defund the Police,” “So Bad Even

Introverts Are Here,” and, of course, the ubiquitous “Black Lives Matter.” As police returned the derision with stony glares, a phalanx of tourists emerged from bars to gawk, stare, and occasionally jeer at the demonstration. Like the police, few wore face masks.

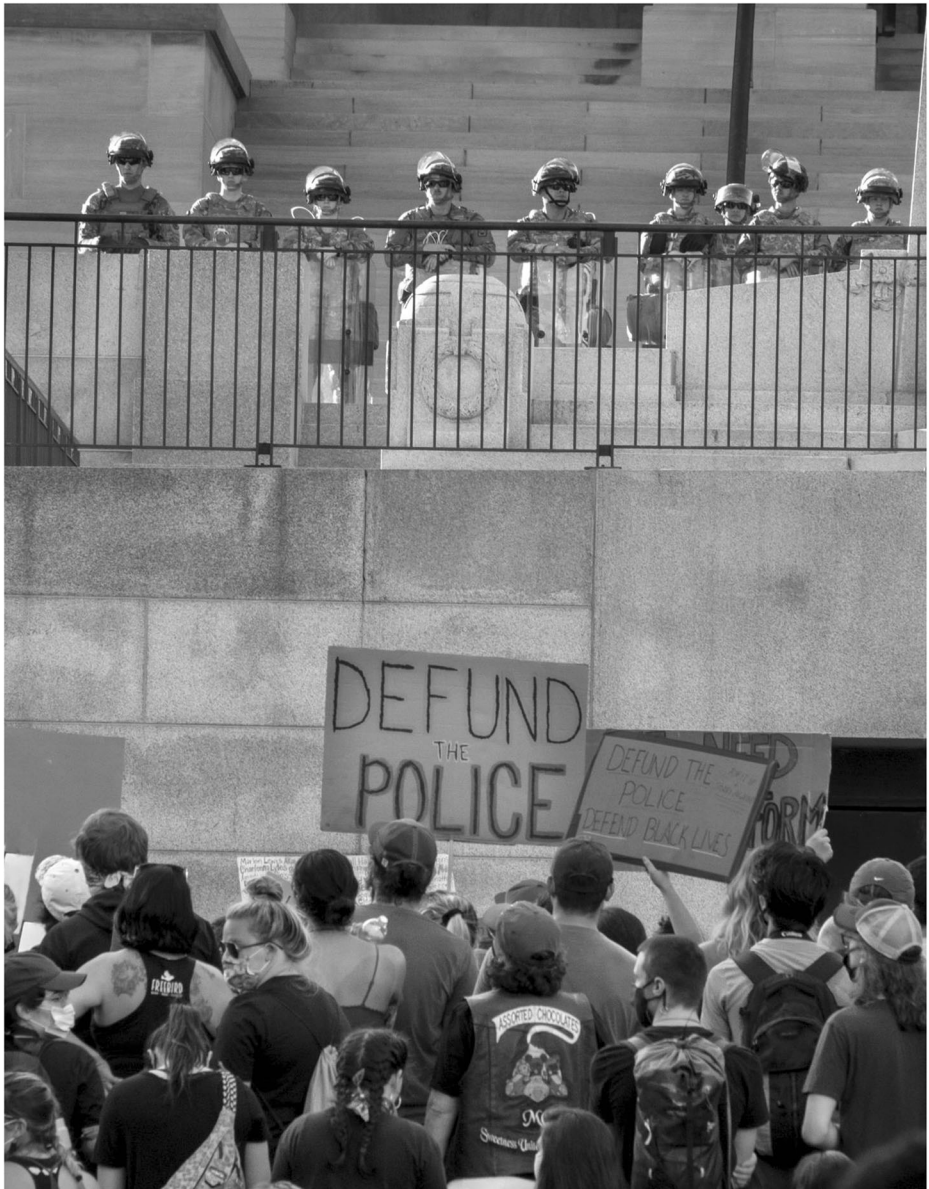


Keeping track of all the protests is difficult, because they are both numerous and decentralized. They included an ongoing occupation of the Capitol grounds, which activists named Ida B. Wells Plaza that has seen waves of arrests. In Nashville’s historic Music Row, a group of musicians proclaimed that “Black Music Matters.” Recording artists complained that the music industry shuns hip-hop and urban music, forcing them to go to Atlanta or New York, despite Nashville’s world-class recording studios. And in the 12 South neighborhood, residents mobilized to back an African-American man fearful of going for walk. “We Walk with Shawn” highlighted the fears of minorities in this gentrifying enclave.

Today’s demonstrations are without the charismatic leadership of Diane Nash, James Lawson, and Bob Moses, who energized the 1960s revolts, and they lack the formal, strategized processes of training, tactical development, and escalation guided by experienced trainers like Lawson. Contemporary protests are mobilized on social media, where the face-to-face interactions that created strong bonds of solidarity in the 60s are more tenuous. Black activists describe white participants as “allies,” not comrades or brothers and sisters, giving the impression, as Adam Shatz notes, “that distrust between Blacks and Whites is not being fought against but institutionalized.”³ Indeed, in one demonstration that I attended in front of Legislative Plaza, a young Black man speculated about the commitment of white people in a verbal commentary recorded over a cellphone video he made of the crowd. He conjectured that many had probably come to be with friends or to take pictures, but, he concluded, “I am glad that they are here.”

³ Adam Shatz 2020 *America Explodes*. *London Review of Books*, June 18. p. 7.

The Nashville protests have crystalized around the call to defund the police, a topic debated among activist groups before the Floyd murder carried it into the mainstream and gave it greater legitimacy.



Yet, it is still too early to tell whether all the energy will morph into a broader movement or fizzle like Occupy Wall Street. As some cities have taken steps to reconfigure public safety, the Nashville city council voted on June 17th to increase the law enforcement budget by \$2.6 million, which the police department said was needed to hire forty-eight new recruits. And as Confederate statues topple elsewhere, even symbolic change is a challenge for Music City. The

state assembly refuses to remove a bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest from the Capitol. Forrest was a Tennessee slave owner and one of the biggest merchants in the Mississippi River slave trade. He served as a Confederate Civil War general and was the first Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan. His statue has been the target of repeated attempts to take it down, past and present.

Despite Tennessee's reputation as a racist bastion of the right, there is a budding infrastructure of left-wing solidarity in Nashville that has educated people about systemic racial injustice and moved the needle beyond calls for more Black representation and diversity training, which have been tried and have come up short. Activist organizations target prison reform, worker rights, and immigration policy, as well as policing and public safety. While it is easy to make fun of self-absorbed whites "checking their privilege," diverse protesters are developing their ideas and their ties to one another on the streets amid a crushing pandemic, widespread unemployment, and an economy on the ropes, while faced with an authoritarian president who is not averse to using the military against them and who sanctions the humiliation of minorities.

Will they be able to forge lasting alliances and scale up their demands? The current round of demonstrations has been mostly silent about the police treatment of immigrants, many of whom live in virus hotspots. Activists appear more comfortable amplifying Black demands among Latinx, rather than broadening the message to demand justice for all people of color, and the nature and duration of future White allegiance is uncertain. While the uprisings have cracked open the door for change, it remains to be seen how much further it can be pried open and who will walk through it.

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