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CENTERPIECE

Berry Hill offers oasis for producers

[Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville](#)

Jun 4, 2021



In 1970, Buzz, a Nashville native songwriter of "Everlasting Love" fame and lead singer of Nashville's first rock band, The Casuals, bought a small Berry Hill house with frequent collaborator Bobby Russell and built a music studio in the back, transforming the residence into one of the first independently owned studios in the city and creating a well-followed template that would see the neighborhood grow into an unlikely oasis for production.

Courtesy / Parker Cason

Nashville's Berry Hill has long been its own town with its own tone and its own thriving take on Music Row.

With a population of a few hundred, ballooning to about 6,500 during the work day according to the city, the independent municipality called "Music Hill" is home to at least 40 recording studios and music publishers in the space of less than one-square mile, as the smallest of Nashville's satellites.

"The community of Berry Hill is still kind of like a small town. They still have their own police department which is awesome ...," said Blackbird Studio Manager Rolff Zwiep. "Everybody here benefits from it still being referred to or run as a small community. It's nothing to call the mayor and talk to them about what's going on in town."

Throughout the relatively sleepy town, quaint residential structures completely hiding high-tech professional studios line Iris Drive and Azuela Place, concealing Berry Hill's prolific music portfolio behind multi-colored siding and decades-old architectural tastes.

"When I set up here in 2018, I knew there were a handful of them, but I didn't know there were more in the unmarked buildings," said The CanRoom owner Ron Rawls. "But you'll see guitars and drum sets coming out the building and your

like, that's another studio."

For discerning musicians and newcomers alike, Music Hill, offers higher ground, as it has since the 1970s.

"It feels sort of like kind of the outlaw side of Nashville," said Parker Cason, producer/engineer at Creative Workshop. "It was really the pop, rock, soul answer to Music Row. It's a lot of independent people trying to make it in the music business however they can. The early stuff was not really country and it's definitely continued that way. A lot of great rock-n-roll records have come out of Berry Hill."

Zwiep was around as a drummer and equipment carrier making frequent trips to the area in the earliest days of the neighborhood's residents fostering its musical identity. He saw how it all began.

"I think a lot of people just followed Buzz Cason," Zwiep said.

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Dubbing it Creative Workshop and bringing on award-winning talent like Travis Turk and Brent Maher, he initially focused on developing and producing new artists, including a young Jimmy Buffett, who was the first to ever record in the studio known affectionately as "the friendly forest." In the years to follow, the studio would host The Doobie Brothers, Faces, Roy Orbison, Merle Haggard and Dolly Parton, to name just a few.

But the entire Berry Hill experiment began as one musician's exit strategy, intersecting with the exit strategy of one of the world's most powerful entities.

"Buzz was on Music Row for a lot of years and decided he didn't want to work there," explained Zwiep. "He always felt like he was being interrupted, somebody was stopping by just to say hello and he just wanted to get off the row and off the beaten path and out of the way so he could be left alone to work."

The neighborhood accommodated Buzz's desire in serendipitous and affordable fashion.

In the 1940s, long before his move, the neighborhood had functioned as a military housing village serving Berry Field Air National Guard Base.

At the conclusion of World War II, the land the town sits on was returned to Nashville. It was rezoned as flexible residential and commercial property and it went for cheap.

When 1970 rolled around, Cason and Russell nabbed two properties at \$20,000 each and a pattern was established.

"People who knew Buzz found this was a really great little area and just started studios," said Zwiep.

By 1980, the area featured not only Cason, but the likes of former Beach Boys promoter and co-manager Fred Vail's Treasure Isle Studios and also Creative Recorders, which would later become Blackbird Studios, among a host of others.

"So many studios that are still here in Berry Hill were founded back then. They may not have the same name but they're

still studios," said Zwiép. "I'd say back then there was probably 25-30 in this area, but all of them have evolved through time. Some don't have the same name or the same owner, have moved to a different location, and so on."

Parker Cason, Buzz's son, said Blackbird is an institution that has become as iconic as any in the area since being picked up by country superstar Martina and husband John McBride at the turn of the millennium.

"Blackbird has kind of taken it to another level and brought in people from all over the world to record in this modern era of Berry Hill," said Cason. "It's a lot of great rock n' roll stuff: The Kings of Leon, The White Stripes, My Morning Jacket. It's stuff you wouldn't associate with Nashville."

These days, among Berry Hill's many colorful musician portrait murals adorning every other fence, there's also six-time Grammy Award winning producer Vance Powell, formerly of Blackbird, who along with Mitch Dane, runs Sputnik Sound, which has worked with Neil Young, Jack White and Chris Stapleton, among others.

Throughout the decades, the ethos of the area has remained largely intact.

"It's a great community. Nashville's creative community and the studio community in general, even though we're all competitors, we're all very friendly competitors and everybody shares in the success," Zwiép said. "If I can't book a studio for somebody, it's not uncommon for me to refer somebody to another studio. That way everybody benefits."

And it continues to provide a home for newer independent studios like Rawls', along with an slowly but surely increasing list of studios, with names like Addiction Studios and Trace Horse Recording Studio popping up on Berry Hill's east side.

"I think Berry Hill provides another opportunity for music to thrive in Nashville. I'm one of those people who get to live it. I dreamed of having a studio on Music Row one day, so having Music Hill is like the next best thing and it may be the best thing at this point," Rawls said. "It gives my studio a name. It gives me an opportunity to put a stake in the ground like 'Hey, Ron was here. From 2018 to however long, I was here.'"

Fortunately for those that call it home, Berry Hill has so far been relatively unaffected by the rampant corporatization and gentrification plaguing other areas of Nashville.

"Everything was independent over here until very recently. When Universal bought House of Blues a few years ago, that was the first moment of, 'Oh boy, here come the majors,'" said Cason, noting there's also now a Big Machine owned restaurant on Bransford.

It hasn't been immune to every symptom though.

"Berry Hill property values have escalated pretty sharply, as has all property throughout Davidson County. It's pretty drastic," said Zwiép. "It's pretty amazing to see how that's kept us in a real estate bubble. It's grown so rapidly, anything within a mile of downtown is off the charts in value."

Despite the ripples of change, Cason is confident in the area's ability to stem the tide.

"I'm not necessarily quite as scared over here because it's a little limited in where you can go. It's cradled by the highway, 65 and 440, then also by a massive cemetery and you can't really grow past Thompson Lane either," Cason said. "Unless someone comes in and starts buying up a bunch of places, there's only so much they could do."

"Music Row is essentially high rises now and I don't think that's going to be possible in Berry Hill. It kind of keeps things reigned in a little bit, for now."

Zwiep disagreed.

"To a degree, I think we're getting there," said Zwiep. "I think that's right around the corner. There's a couple companies that are starting some business over here that are buying up property."

Whatever the future might hold, Cason hopes to carry on in the legacy of his father Buzz, who is now 82 and still writes and records songs regularly in keeping with his passions.

"He still wakes up with songs and has to get them down," Cason said. "He's always bugging me like 'I've got some new songs. Lets get something on the books.'"

It's the kind of passion that still emanates from the walls of the quiet and humble suburb that has been tread regularly by artists of all levels and music devotees since the the 1970s.

"I'm proud to be a part of Nashville's outsider music scene, if you will," Cason said. "It's still a viable, professional place. It's not like we're an underground scene or anything, but I love the fact that's it not the pop country exclusive world and people are just losing their soul pitching songs ... It's more of a place to just hunker down and make records."

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