

Transcript For *Curious Nashville*: “How Well Do You Know Our City’s Claim To Fame?”

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Tony Gonzalez, host: There are some things that everyone thinks they know about Nashville, and some quirks that baffle seemingly all of the tourists here. So today, we're unpacking the essentials of Music City.

This is Curious Nashville. I'm Tony Gonzalez, one of the reporters at Nashville Public Radio. For this special episode, we bring a trio of local experts to the stage to answer some of the big questions about Nashville, and to take questions on the fly from a live audience.

We thought, what better time to do this than at the PodX conference for hundreds of out- of-town podcasters who were visiting for the first time and noticing things? Today you'll hear from the Nashville Scene's J.R. Lind, local food writer Jennifer Justice and historian David Ewing, all captured live at PodX 2019.

We're going to open with a few stories that we think are essential to understanding Nashville. Each of our guests is going to tackle one of these.

Chapter 1: The It City

If you didn't already know, you're currently sitting in the middle of a very popular city. Since around 2013, Nashville has been called, and has gladly been calling itself, the “it city” — you know, *the* place to visit.

NEWS MONTAGE: With the buzz about Nashville continuing to grow, it's something we could have guessed, this past year was the greatest year for tourism in Music City ...

The unprecedented growth ...

Record-breaking year for tourism ...

The rest of the world has sort of had this idea that Nashville must be like “yeehaw,” but there's so much more to it than the stereotypical image ...

We started the year off pretty good. When the New York Times had an article saying that Nashville was the new it city ...

It city, and having all this prosperity ...

People asked me what it means, and I say, "I don't know, but just enjoy it. It's good to be the 'it city'" ...

The "first on every foodie's list" city. The "you never know who you might bump into" city ...

But it can also bring some struggles ...

Are we reaching a point where progress is now clashing with our preservation?

In order for Nashville to continue to be a "it city," everybody needs to be a part of it ...

Tony Gonzalez: So we've got Nashville scene reporter J.R. Lind here to talk about the city's recent boom and its popularity. J.R. is a Middle Tennessee native. He's a longtime chronicler of the quirky and lover of the idiosyncratic. He says he's a dedicated defender of spiced round, and of cow punk, and he has a fire-breathing rooster tattooed on his leg. So J.R., tell us, what's the deal with being the "it city"?

J.R. Lind, journalist: Oh, were that we all knew. We'll go back to January 2013. The New York Times then-Atlanta bureau chief Kim Severson took a trip up I-75 and I-24 to Music City to see what all the fuss was about. **Its building or sitting in the** Music City Center was just about to open, and the city was well on its way to recovery from the devastating flood of May 2010. Severson wrote, quote, "It is hard to find a resident who does not break into the goofy grin of the newly popular when the subject of Nashville status comes up," and then Severson wrote the phrase that launched a thousand pedal taverns.

Quote: "Portland knows the feeling. Austin had it once, too. So did Dallas. Even Las Vegas enjoyed a brief moment as the nation's 'it city,'" and for the past six years everyone in Nashville has heard "it city" more times than they'd care to count. Now, our desperate need to rebuke our "Hee Haw" reputation jumped into high gear. Running in last week's issue of the *National Scene*, Steve Cavendish noted the phrase "it city" appeared in the *Tennessean* 813 times in the six years since Severson's article.

So what does quote "it" mean? Your guess is as good as ours and apparently former Mayor Karl Dean, who also said he had no idea what it was. Though, in part, it means people want to visit here: 16 million in 2018, an increase of more than 5 million from 2012. It means people want to move here: around 93 people per day every day for the last six years in the Greater Nashville area. And it means businesses want to relocate here in large part because the city is so willing to hand out incentives for them to do so. There is, of course, backlash, as you started to hear a little bit in the clip Tony played. Many longtime Nashvillians see the city selling its soul to cater to tourists. In its broader sense, there's a widespread feeling that the city label has allowed the powers that be to focus all their attention on tourists and in-movers, and that the economic benefits promised by this boom are not spread evenly. Which has led to a weaponizing of the term, with people asking, "If this is the 'it city,' why isn't there more affordable housing?" or "Why is the city operating on a tight budget? Why is the council proposing a 52-cent

property tax increase? Why aren't our roads or our schools getting any better?" Cavendish in the *Scene* article argued we should stop using the term altogether, but every time we try to shed it and move on, our evolution from city into full-time event seems to continue. And peak "it"-ness may still be in the future.

Tony Gonzalez: "It city" is certainly not dying today since we're going to talk about it here.

J.R. Lind: Yeah, I didn't really do a lot to kill it there, did I?

Chapter 2: Hot Chicken

Tony Gonzalez: We're gonna go to our next essential Nashville explanation. We're gonna go to Jennifer Justice. Jennifer is going to tell us about hot chicken.

NEWS MONTAGE: When it comes to chicken, some people definitely like it hot ...

Straight from Nashville, it's smoky, crispy, spicy ...

Hot chicken is fried chicken that is dipped ...

MAN WHISPERING: Hot chicken, tell me what you're missing. Kiss another man while you're working at the kitchen. Hot chicken ...

NEWS MONTAGE: Nashville hot chicken is showing up everywhere from fast-food joints to trendy restaurants ...

I was like, gimme the hot as I can. I can handle anything ...

Tony Gonzalez: Jennifer tells me that she once convinced a boyfriend to break a 15-year vegetarian streak to eat Prince's Hot Chicken. She is the author of the book "Nashville Eats." She has written for *Time*, *Rolling Stone Country* and *Southern Living*, among others. She's the co-founder of Dirty Pages, which is a recipes storytelling project. And she now works at a hunger relief organization, The Nashville Food Project. Jennifer, can you tell us sort of the story of hot chicken? Fill us in: what's up with hot chicken?

Jennifer Justus: Yes, so hot chicken dates back to the 1930s with a man named Thornton Prince. And as the story goes, Thornton was a good-looking man and also a little bit of a run around, and came home to one of his girlfriend's late one too many times, and she decided to take some fried chicken that she'd made and make it super-hot. We don't know exactly how, maybe cayenne pepper, not sure but she wanted to hurt him. And, of course, he ate it and he loved it, and decided to eventually, you know, develop his own thing, and he started a restaurant. At the time, it was called the Barbecue Chicken Shack, which is a little misleading because it didn't really involve barbecue, but had lots of different locations around the city or moved a lot of times. But

it's still in the family. It's run by Andre Prince Jeffries, who's the great-niece of Thornton Prince. It's definitely recognized as the original four hot chicken.

And I feel like a lot of attention came to hot chicken when the Music City Hot Chicken Festival began in 2007. We had a former mayor, Bill Purcell, who was truly a big hot chicken fan. I mean, he called Prince's his "other office" and decided that we should have this festival, and it was ... a little janky. I mean, it was small ...

David Ewing: You left out: it's the Fourth of July, so it's also hot.

Jennifer Justus: Right. But by the time I had arrived, they had run out of anything to drink at this Hot Chicken Festival, which was (laughs). But, you know, I feel like he was just, he was onto something because nowadays the Music City Hot Chicken Festival is great. There's bands, amateur cooking competitions, and it's really, it's become, now you can find hot chicken, Nashville-style hot chicken, at Peaches HotHouse in Brooklyn, you can find it in L.A., you can find it in Melbourne, Australia. So it's definitely become one of our exports.

Tony Gonzalez: I will say, my first hot chicken festival experience, it was like 102 degrees. Literally. Like, I almost had to be taken away. Like, I had the photo. I mean I was completely sweaty and crying. I guess we've all been there, right?

Jennifer, I did have one follow-up about how chicken that I think we should talk about. You've talked about it being, it's become an export that is showing up in other cities. I think we played a clip from KFC. KFC is Nashville-style hot chicken, but I think the other kind of big question especially locally is about appropriation. And you touched on this a little bit. Well, you know, it's pioneered by African American businesses. Can you just talk a little bit about that and how torn people might be?

Jennifer Justus: Yes, and thank you for asking. Very important. So this definitely was created in black communities and really kind of remained that way for 60 to 70 years. I mean, I know a lot of white folks who grew up here and maybe went away and came back and hot chicken's a thing and they're like, "What is this?" like, "I didn't, you know, grow up with this."

And that's not to say that white folks didn't enjoy hot chicken, and I think the famous example of that is some white Opry stars back when the Grand Ole Opry was still at the Ryman, Prince's Hot Chicken was located sort of near the Ryman, and they got wind of this awesome chicken place that they could go to. And this was during segregation. And so the way that the Prince's folks dealt with that they were like, "We've got this room in the back that you all can sit in."

Tony Gonzalez Later, one Opry star even opened her own hot chicken place. That was in the early 2000s, and it was one of the first with a white owner — a distinction that would disappear a decade later.

Jennifer Justus Well, Hattie B's came along in 2012, and that hot chicken place, the family that owns Hattie B's, they had been involved in big restaurant operations. So the grandfather in that family was CEO of Morrison's which also was involved with Ruby Tuesday's at one point I think. And so, they were no longer affiliated with Morrison's but were running a meat and three in Franklin and loved hot chicken and said, "OK, let's develop you know our own recipe." They did and people loved it, so they were like, "OK, let's open a hot chicken place." So that was 2012 that Hattie B's opened, and at the height of, you know, "it city"-ness.

And when, you know, food scene was getting kind of a lot of attention, and they opened in a very white area near Vanderbilt, near tourist areas, and the place took off. And so, coming from, you know, the background that they come from, they do what you do. They open more restaurants. So a writer who had gone to Vanderbilt but was living in New York decided to write a story, and the headline was "Learn more about the man who launched the hot chicken craze." But the story was about the chef at Hattie B's. And so that caused a, you know, huge uproar. It's not about Hattie B's chicken versus Prince's Chicken; it's about access to resources and about money.

Tony Gonzalez: Let me ask you an easier question, to close the hot chicken section. Do you recommend that we all go eat hot chicken?

Jennifer Justus: Yes!

J.R. Lind: I thought you're asking me, which I was going to say yes.

David Ewing Yes.

Jennifer Justus: And now we say ...

J.R. Lind It's unanimous.

David Ewing: — and go to Prince's.

Tony Gonzalez: I endorse all of this. We could go on forever about the hotness of our food here in Nashville, but we're not going to do that.

David Ewing: Or the hotness of our city.

Tony Gonzalez: That's right. I should say, I should point out, we're all a little bit on pins and needles and we talk about history in any way because David Ewing is the history buff.

Chapter 3: Music City

Tony Gonzalez: David is an eighth-generation Nashvillian, an attorney and, as I said, a local history buff. David is going to take us deeper into one of the other essences, if we

can have more than one of Nashville, and an even longer running nickname. So we are often asked, "Why is Nashville known as Music City?" And it's probably easy for people to assume the wrong answer to this question.

So, David, can talk to us about why Nashville claims this name Music City?

David Ewing: Of course, we are the capital of country music, and we're the capital of the recording industry too. And that's what most people, you know, say that we're Music City for. But you really have to go back to the 19th century in Fisk University. Fisk University was started in 1867 as a school for former enslaved people, including my great-great-grandfather who was one of the first graduates of Fisk.

And you had to understand that most people back then in the days of slavery did not have any education. So Fisk actually started off teaching kind of K through 12 too because everyone was on the same education level. But Fisk was always hand in mouth starting off, and they didn't have a lot of funding. So the treasurer of Fisk University was this man by the name of George White, decided that he could have these students travel across the country and sing and raise money for the university. And that's a win-win situation.

So he went to the president of Fisk University and asked him, "Hey, what do you think of this idea? I'm going to raise all this money so you don't have to." And he said, "We have hardly enough money to educate these students and teach these students and be here and pay for these buildings." And he said no. But the treasurer had the check. And so he wrote the check anyway and took these students off cross country.

And their start was the night of the Great Chicago Fire. And when they were in the Midwest, their concert was well-attended, and they felt really bad for what had happened in Chicago, and so the gate which was a little under a hundred dollars, they gave the entire gate to the Chicago Fire Fund. And people thought they needed the money, they desperately needed the money, and they gave literally everything to the fund. And that caused them to be invited, like, all over the country: "Hey, help these students out see what they did!" They went viral for the first time, and they got invitations from Boston to New York, even the White House under that great President Chester Arthur, hosted the Jubilee singers.

And so, they got the attention of Queen Victoria who was on the throne in England, and so they traveled their first international tour, and they sung in front of the queen, in the 1870s, and this is where it kind of fact and fiction kind of meld. So if you look online everyone says, "Oh, we are Music City because Queen Victoria physically said after hearing the Jubilee Singers speak: 'You must be from the musical city.' She was so impressed". Well, the problem is she never said that.

Now that does not mean that their contribution did not turn into Nashville being known as Music City, and this is why I say so. They were so well-known and liked. There were knockoff groups of them. There must have been a dozen knockoff groups, other African Americans that would sing around the country. Some were called the Nashville

students, or the Tennessee plantation singers and the Ozark Jubilee Singers. And so there were all these names, and so their brand really was tied to Nashville and Fisk, and people when they heard this good singing.

The other thing that the Jubilee Singers did was preserve a legacy of music that happened before the Civil War that we would not have known the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “Go Down Moses” if it weren't for the singers taking these songs and recording them, though everyone says, "Oh, it's because of country music and the Opry and all that." And so, the poor Jubilee Singers have kind of gotten pushed aside in some people's kind of telling of our Music City brand. But they were traveling every, in probably every major city in a lot of major companies. They even played New Zealand back in 1880s! I mean they really got around and so they were from Nashville and they told their story. So I think that the brand was first, you know, it might not have been what we call it, Music City USA, but people understood that Nashville was a city because these amazing singers were from that city.

Tony Gonzalez: And we've held out on you, but we have two recordings, just a little sample of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

[Musical montage]

Tony Gonzalez: Those were recordings from 1909 and from just a couple of years ago. They concluded the prepared remarks from David and the panelists. After a short break, we open it up to the unscripted audience questions.

You're listening to *Curious Nashville* recorded live at the PodX Conference 2019.

Midroll Break

Chapter 4: Q&A

Tony Gonzalez: With a lot of tourists and some locals in the crowd, it was time to open the floor to field their questions.

So please, we're inviting you to pick our brains. What have you noticed about Nashville, or something you've wondered since you've been here? Do you just want to hear more about hot chicken, or do you need a different recommendation for something to do tonight? So please, if you have a question, approach the mike. Introduce yourself. Tell us who you are and where you're from.

Stephan Passmore: All right. My name is Stephan Passmore. I'm here, I'm actually from Muscle Shoals, Alabama. I come to Nashville a lot. I'm here today working with thePodcast Business Journal.

You mentioned at the start of the panel that something like 93 people a day have been moving here. I've heard it closer to 150. So my question is, for folks who are from here who live here and have for a long time, is the infrastructure there really to accommodate this influx? And if not, what do you see that's being done to accommodate this this new influx of people?

Tony Gonzalez: The truth is that our 10-county region, the population grows by 100 people-ish per day. That includes births, deaths, moving in, moving out, and a lot of that growth is actually in the counties surrounding Nashville. But yes, the region is growing by a population of like 100 people a day. That's the number.

J.R. Lind That's the net. Right.

David Ewing: Ten counties, not just Nashville.

Tony Gonzalez: Correct.

J.R. Lind: As for the infrastructure, I think the answer is no, currently. I don't know how many of you travel on 440. If you didn't, then don't. It's under construction; that's our ring road. Voters in Nashville rejected a transit referendum for one reason or another. Kind of what worries me is we do have to put these people somewhere. I mean I guess. We can't send them back. I mean we've tried. Nashville is a rare city, I think, in that you do not have to travel very far to be in the country. So it worries me that, to me, that's something unique about Nashville. And at some point they're going to build apartments.

Tony Gonzalez: I think we have a local question coming up.

Mark Drury: Yeah. My name is Mark Drury. I am a Nashville resident and have been since the mid '80s. And kind of a cultural question about Nashville is: for many years, discussions about Nashville's growth inevitably heard the phrase, "Well, you know, we don't want to become another Atlanta." And I've noticed that in the last five years or so, that phrase has kind of disappeared from the parlance a little bit. And I'm wondering if that is kind of a tacit admission that despite our best efforts, we follow the same trajectory as other larger cities in the Southeast like Atlanta.

J.R. Lind: The currency of that phrases ancient, and we don't want to be the next Atlanta. If I remember correctly, that was even like the inspiration for the Wataugans, was they were trying to prevent Nashville ... The Wataugans were a group of businessmen who, I don't know how to put this, well they weren't a machine, but ...

David Ewing: They were a group of white men that were the presidents of the banks and the universities and the insurance companies and the newspapers, and they all got in a room when everything was locally owned here. And if they could agree on something, it happened because all the local ownership was local and they decided and things happened.

J.R. Lind: Right. And part of their impetus was we don't want to sprawl like Atlanta, but even in the '70s and '80s, Nashville was already like this sprawlingest city in America. We were inevitably going to sprawl like Atlanta, unfortunately.

David Ewing: And the Atlanta thing, you know, there was a time where we embraced the Atlanta thing. We'd say, "Oh, when you're explaining someone in Nashville that doesn't really know about Nashville we're just like Atlanta but 10 years ago." And we stopped saying that, you know.

Tony Gonzalez: We've also heard the Atlanta mayor occasionally shoot back a little comment about how Nashville should aspire to be. And so they're hearing, they're hearing the message sometimes in Atlanta. I think we have another ...

Lily Terrell: Hi, I'm Lily Terrell, currently from Atlanta, but also coming from Charlotte, where the same situation, they're very similar. So my question is about that, is the idea of hidden history, and how we see the skyscrapers in all of Charlotte and all other cities and how people have to move from one area, another people have coming to an area. What are some of the other hidden areas in Nashville?

David Ewing: Well, sadly, we tour a lot of that stuff down in downtown. You know, I would venture around Jefferson Street and Fisk University. I mean, even just walking through Fisk campus, you'll see Jubilee Hall. You'll see the administration building where Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas has murals. You'll see the gymnasium at Fisk University which is now this Van Vechten Art Gallery.

The other hidden history that I'm working on right now is the women's suffrage movement. We're coming up on the 100th anniversary next year. Tennessee was the state that gave 27 million women the right to vote by one vote in the Tennessee state legislature. And there are many sites related to that battle. In August of 1920, that people have forgotten or don't really acknowledge, one was the Ryman Auditorium. Most people, the Ryman is a few blocks from here and is kind of, probably, has more history per square foot than most buildings anywhere in America. But in 1914, the national American Women's Suffrage Association Convention, the group that Susan B. Anthony started, had their national convention here in Nashville. And that was probably the most important convention that we've ever had in this convention city, because it was that convention that kind of gave Tennessee the momentum and train the women that would eventually have to do the state-by-state battle.

Tony Gonzalez: We only have a few minutes left. I do want to ask Jennifer to talk about, we had debated what foods subject to prepare remarks about. Any other competitor was the Nashville, or I don't know if we should call the Nashville, the meat and three. But Jennifer, do want to talk? I know you want to talk a little bit about the meat and three, what that is, and where someone might want to go experience.

Jennifer Justus: Yeah. Even though I convinced a boyfriend to eat Nashville-style hot chicken, I really like the meat and three story a whole lot better. Or I just feel more connected to meat and threes. And that boyfriend, by the way, is my husband. So it

worked out, and he never ate meat again or never was a vegetarian again. But, meat and threes, I think, you know, we've had a big collection of them here in Nashville and there are a lot of stories about why that is. And one of my favorites ...

Tony Gonzalez: Before we get to the story: meat and three. What does that mean?

Jennifer Justus: OK. So it's a place where you order a meat and three vegetables. I always put it in quotes because that could mean ...

J.R. Lind: Macaroni and cheese as a vegetable, in this definition.

Jennifer Justus: Right. And fried okra. And candied yams, and really, you know, I feel like the meat and three is a celebration of what grows here, because there's the meat, yes. But there's also all these vegetables, and a lot of times it's really more like the meat and 17 because you have a lot of choices there. But a lot of theories have been thrown around, and we don't know for sure. But John T. Edge, who is the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, I like that he said that maybe we have a lot of meats and threes here because we've been a country come to town kind of town. So people coming here maybe for country music and wanted that country food. I think that's a pretty good theory, but I don't know that that's true. John Edgerton, who was a historian and food writer here, he wasn't so sure about that theory. He thought we should just, you know, count our lucky stars and be glad that that it is a type of food that we enjoy here. But I think there is a little bit of a link to the music business. The oldest meat and three in town, which I'm not sure if they've opened back up, The Pie Wagon. And it did close for a minute, but people used to call it the Music Row commissary because it was close to Music Row and people from Music Row would go have lunch there so often. And a well-known music writer used to say that oftentimes there would be a gravy stain on the contract because the deal would go down at the meat and three more often than it might at the boardroom.

Tony Gonzalez: Is there a meat and three you would recommend?

Jennifer Justus: What day is it, Friday? Arnold's!

J.R. Lind: There's prime rib on Friday, isn't there?

David Ewing: Well, I mean, one right around the corner on Eighth Avenue. You could walk there, actually.

Tony Gonzalez: Walking distance.

J.R. Lind: And it would be good to walk back after you eat at Arnold's, particularly if you get all three vegetables.

David Ewing: Yes.

Tony Gonzalez: Can we have a hand for our brave and knowledgeable experts?

(clapping)

I certainly hope you've learned something. I hope you've learned something that makes you want to learn more somethings about Nashville or your own cities.

Episode Credits

Tony Gonzalez: *Curious Nashville* is a project of Nashville Public Radio. I'm Tony Gonzalez, the executive producer. Thank you to our guest experts David Ewing, Jennifer Justus and J.R. Lind. The show is usually edited by Emily Siner and Anita Bugg. Audio mastering by Carl Pedersen. Cameron Adkins is our engineer. Our theme music is by Poddington Bear. Mack Linebaugh oversees all things digital. Speaking of, you can catch all of our stories, both long-form podcasts and short-form web answers, at curious.wpln.org. Or you can just Google *Curious Nashville*. Thanks to PodX for having us here this morning. This is *Curious Nashville*.