

# SCREEN GRAB

by Steve Haruch

## Five iconic Nashville locations, as seen in the movies



While most of the location tourism in Nashville these days revolves around the eponymous TV series, the 1975 film of the same name was perhaps Music City's first big turn on the big screen. Though there are many more than the five presented here—the 1966 Waylon Jennings vehicle *Nashville Rebel* probably accounts for at least a dozen on its own, not to mention the various around-town escapades of one Ernest P. Worrell—these locations give a sense of Nashville's presence in cinema over the years.

### THE NATIONS

Legend has it that the conditions were so grim in some of the houses where filming took place for Harmony Korine's debut feature *Gummo* that crew members wore hazmat suits in protest. (The legend also has it that Korine responded by showing up on set wearing flip-flops.) Today in The Nations—the west-side neighborhood where *Gummo* was largely shot—cafes, craft beer and open-floor-plan new construction abound. Back in 1997, the area's run-down houses and looming industrial backdrop made it a convincing stand-in for the town of Xenia, Ohio, which had been ravaged by a tornado two decades earlier and never really recovered. Perhaps Korine was ahead of his time not only in location scouting but also in presaging the bacon craze of the early 2000s—there's a crisp slice taped to the wall, for some reason, in a scene that also involves a large plate of spaghetti and a memorably filthy bathtub.



### THE PARTHENON

Legendary songwriter and producer Billy Sherrill was responsible for Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" and George Jones' "He Stopped Loving Her Today," among many other classics. In 1975, after seeing Robert Altman's *Nashville*, Sherrill told a reporter that the one part of the movie he liked—spoiler alert—was "when they shot that miserable excuse for a country music singer." Less clear were his feelings about the Parthenon, the Centennial Park landmark where they shot the scene in question. The first version, built with perishable materials for the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition, gave way to the current edition, fashioned in 1925 from far sturdier stuff—"cement, sand and small pebbles of diverse colors, carefully mixed," as described in *The New York Times*. The replica temple to Athena also made a more literal-minded appearance in the film adaptation of the Greek mythology-themed YA novel *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*.



### THE RYMAN AUDITORIUM

In 1974, under the auspices of *The New Yorker*, Garrison Keillor came to Music City to cover the Grand Ole Opry's move from the Ryman Auditorium to its new haven in the exurbs. Keillor was so struck by what he saw and heard that he was moved to produce his own radio variety show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. It's hard to fathom now just how close the hallowed Ryman came to being demolished

in the years after the Opry left and the Mother Church sat abandoned. But a brush with death couldn't stop a star turn in the 1980 biopic *Coal Miner's Daughter*, which followed the life of Loretta Lynn (as played by Sissy Spacek) from impoverished Butcher Hollow, Ky., to the apogee of country music stardom, which came with an Opry gig at the Ryman. Keillor's trip preceded Robert Altman's *Nashville* by a year—and in a bittersweet bookend, the director's swan song was a movie adaptation of *A Prairie Home Companion*.



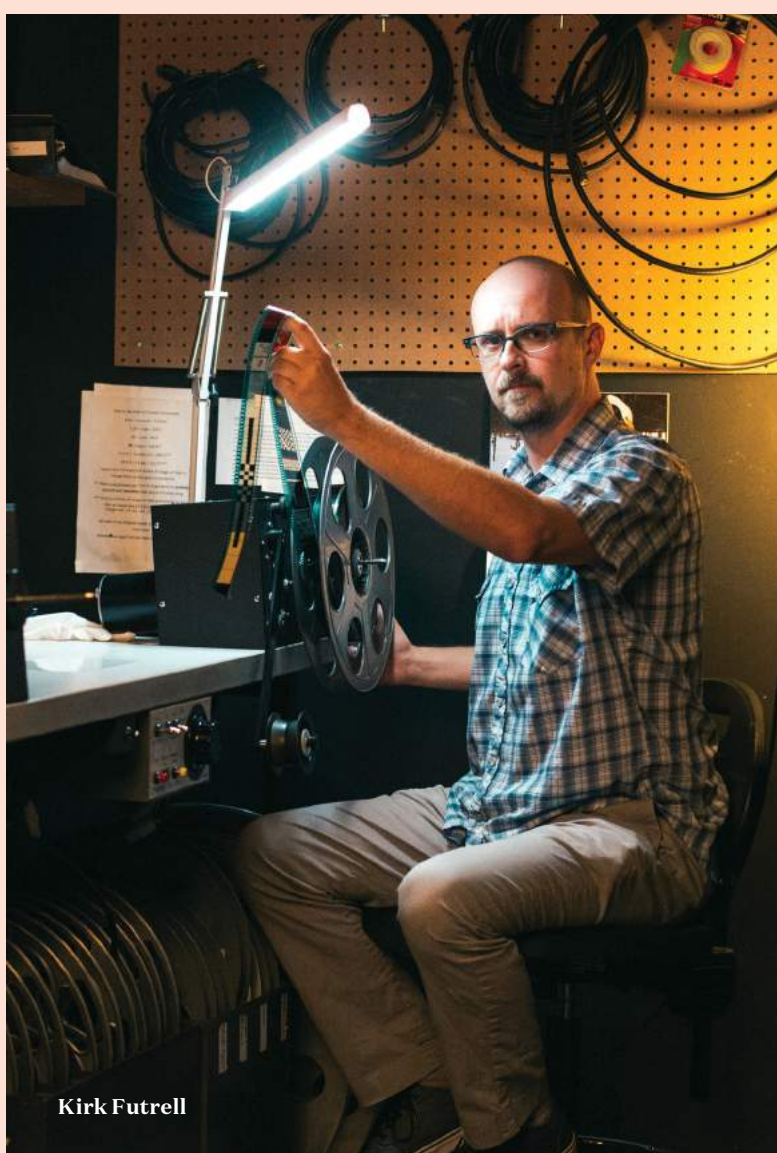
### THE BLUEBIRD CAFE

Situated in a nondescript strip mall, The Bluebird Cafe doesn't necessarily look like a place where country stars are born—not from the outside, at least—but that's exactly what its role has been for decades. Director Peter Bogdanovich made good use of it as a central location in his Music City yarn *The Thing Called Love*. In the opening scene, Miranda Presley (Samantha Mathis) takes a cab directly there from the Greyhound station. In a nice touch, her cab driver is a songwriter, too, with a Top 20 hit in rotation. It's also where Miranda first meets fellow songwriter James Wright (River Phoenix). Released just months before Phoenix's death in 1993, *The Thing Called Love*—which also includes a cameo by the gloriously seedy Drake Motel—gets a lot of little things right, including the outsize influence of this little Green Hills listening room.



### TENNESSEE STATE PRISON

Originally built for 800 inmates, the Tennessee State Prison operated on the banks of the Cumberland River for almost a century, from 1898 to 1992. Its imposing exterior is probably best known from the 1999 film *The Green Mile*, in which it plays the part of Cold Mountain Penitentiary in Louisiana, site of the death row ward where the fictional John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) is executed under the supervision of Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks). Johnny Cash's 1977 TV special *A Concert: Behind Prison Walls* was filmed there, and its ramparts make an appearance in the White Stripes' "Icky Thump" video. Other cameos include *The Last Castle*, *Ernest Goes to Jail* and Robert Altman's *Nashville*. The prison is closed to the public today, but the Tennessee Department of Corrections commissioned a drone video shoot, which you can watch online to get a sense of the stately design and slow decay. ♦



Kirk Futrell

## CLEAN PROJECTORS

A dark room, a bright wall and Kirk Futrell

by Steve Haruch / Photo by Daniel Meigs

In a world where opinions can differ sharply on the best way to present movies, both analog and digital formats have their diehards. Kirk Futrell has staked out a somewhat pragmatic position.

"I feel different than some of my colleagues," he says, sitting in the back row of the 1925 Hall at the Belcourt Theatre at 2102 Belcourt Ave. "Movies should be shot on film. They don't necessarily have to be projected on film to look great."

Futrell is head projectionist at the Belcourt, Nashville's independent art cinema, and as such he's in charge of making sure the films shown there look and sound their best. And he says the theater's digital projection system can look even better than film, which can gather dust and scratches over time.

"If it's scanned correctly, it's a crisp, really close-to-perfect image," he says. "With a 4K projector, if you walk down to the screen, you don't see any pixels."

It's quite a departure from the multiplex in Martin, Tenn., where Futrell worked when he was in high school, first as an usher and eventually as a projectionist.

"You could tell which theaters cared about the film and which ones didn't," he recalls. "When you would go watch the movie and it was all scratched and dirty, or out of focus, and the sound was bad, they were just doing their job—throw it up on the screen, sell some popcorn." Futrell developed a deeper appreciation for the craft of projection during a stint in Akron, Ohio, where he joined a trade union and worked with some projectors that were more than 70 years old.

One of the first things Futrell did when he took over at the Belcourt—which, by the way, also sells popcorn, not to mention wine and beer—was to institute a "zero tolerance policy" for projectionists. That means wearing gloves when handling film prints, and triple-checking that the film is threaded through the projector properly. It also means having two projectionists assigned to every screening.

The Belcourt has shown everything from 16mm film to DCP (digital cinema package). Recently, Futrell even rigged up a system to show old VHS tapes through one of the theater's 4K projectors. A particularly challenging presentation came with a recent screening of Dario Argento's 1977 cult classic *Suspiria*.

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- KIRK FUTRELL

The film itself was the only known Italian print in the U.S. While the 35mm projector was playing that, a digital projector was simultaneously overlaying English subtitles—more than a thousand slides that were hand-changed in real time, like a PowerPoint presentation. (This method required three projectionists in the booth to pull off.)

Futrell's work involves more than just beaming the film onto the screen, though. Dimming the lights at exactly the right moment, framing the image perfectly with the drapes—these are part of the job, too.

"I really want to emphasize that this is a beautiful room," Futrell says, "and that you're about to see a show." ♦

BELCOURT THEATRE—2102 BELCOURT AVE.