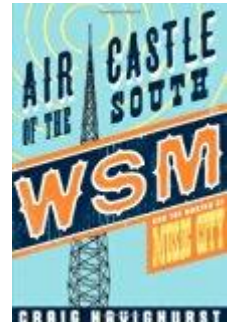


**Craig Havighurst.** *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xix + 279 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03257-8.



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## More than a Little Bit Country: Radio Station WSM

WSM, which is 650 on your AM dial, is one of the most important radio stations in U.S. history. That it no longer holds much significance in the music industry is the subtext of this well-written story that chronicles its creation, growth, conglomeration, and fall. According to his publisher, Craig Havighurst, an author and filmmaker based in Nashville, Tennessee, was inspired to write this book after a well-publicized attempt in 2002 to drop country music and the Grand Ole Opry program from the station's programming. He has written the history of the WSM (and its subsequent publishing, recording, booking, television, cable, and theme park enterprises) as it relates to the development of the music industry in a city in middle Tennessee. The book is a part of the University of Illinois's Music in American Life series, one of the most valuable archives of American music that we have.

*Air Castle of the South* covers some of the ground trod upon by well-known country music historians, such as Bill Malone (*Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern*

*Working Class* [2002]), and mass media historians, such as Joli Jensen (*The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* [1998]). In fact, those titles are more appropriate for a history of radio or a mass media history course. Malone touches on themes of class and race; Jensen looks at the influence of capitalism and the market—topics that are commonly covered in such courses. While an important contribution to the library of country music history, Havighurst's book does not have the extensive footnotes, for example, one would like to see in a classroom text (although it does include short bibliographic entries with each chapter).

What Havighurst does well is describe in great detail and yet at a fairly rapid clip how WSM came to be a dominant player in American music. In doing so, he gives us an entertaining look at the golden era of radio. Forgotten or overlooked characters, like Jim Denny, the one-time concessionaire who started the Artist Service Bureau; Jack DeWitt, the electronics genius who rose to the WSM presidency; and Edwin Craig, the insurance

executive who drove the idea, are shoved into the spotlight. In some other histories, station director George D. Hay gets nearly all the credit and/or glory for the Grand Ole Opry, but Havighurst notes the important contributions of Harry Stone, Hay's associate director, who ran the operation when Hay was absent with what could have been a bipolar illness.

The best chapter in the book is titled "It Helped Everybody in the Long Run." Here, the author details the blossoming of the music business in Nashville from the minds of the folks who ran (or worked for) WSM. The list is long and fascinating: a sample includes Acuff-Rose (publishing), the Artist Service Bureau (booking), Ernest Tubbs Records (LP sales), and Castle Recording. Each business attracted competitors, and, before long, Nashville was "Music City USA"--a phrase struck by popular WSM announcer David Cobb in 1950.

Havighurst includes an interesting section for scholars who examine the beginnings of the Federal Radio Commission and the process of assigning licenses. WSM, which was started by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company in the 1920s (WSM = We Shield Millions), promised the federal government on more than one occasion that the station would serve the public's interest, rather than the business interests of the company. At first, the executives were true to their word, and there was barely a mention of National Life and Accident on the air. But, with management turnover and standard economic pressures, those promises slowly disappeared into the ether. While it is certainly the case that WSM performed admirable public services--read the section on the Ohio River flood of 1937--Havighurst also shows how quickly the parent company began to use the station to promote itself. My favorite story involves how salesmen walked the streets of their neighborhood-territories on Saturday nights, listening for people who were themselves listening to the Grand Ole Opry broadcast. Then, bright and early Monday morning, these salesmen presented them-

selves at the homes of the Opry listeners with a country music-based cold call that sold quite a few insurance policies.

The demise of WSM-AM and the remarkable empire it once helped foster--Opryland USA, TNN, Country Music Television, and all the rest--is covered in a too-brief section of about seven pages at the end of the book. More could be said about the forces that shook the empire.

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