Down and Out, in Nashville

Like a Hank Williams classic, HIV in Music City

August 1, 1997 By Mubarak Dahir

Most of the buildings that fill the 10 or so short city blocks a mile southwest of downtown Nashville seem like simple Southern cottages, brick or stone buildings with verandas and swings. The two main streets that thread this sliver of the city run parallel and in opposite directions; driving the loop takes less than 10 minutes. It is a deceptively pleasant and quiet place, and as you make the loop you can easily imagine sipping iced tea and swinging barefoot on the porches.

But like so much in this self-conscious Southern city, exteriors hide more than they reveal. This is Music Row, the heart of Country Music USA. The unpretentious architecture of the predominantly single-story structures alludes to country and western's cottage-industry roots. But behind these humble facades are the recording studios, songwriting houses and publishing companies where careers -- and millions -- are made or lost.

Of course, here, like everywhere else in Nashville and in the country-music industry it houses, the jagged, sometimes crass realities of the business have a way of puncturing the pristine public image. On Music Row, this can be seen in the newer buildings of glass and steel and concrete that have exchanged Southern charm for pragmatism. From the offices atop these buildings, one can look north toward downtown Nashville and see not only a view of the city but a reflection of the industry as well.

Residents of Nashville are fiercely proud of their skyline, a tangible symbol that this is a cosmopolitan city, not a hillbilly town. So many people have moved here from New York City and LA -- particularly in connection with the country music industry -- that one of Nashville's many nicknames has become "The Third Coast." A visitor here is frequently reminded of the city's reputation for tolerance and culture, despite the conservative roots of country music's core constituents and the *Hee-Haw* reputation of the Grand Ole Opry.

But Music City USA -- perhaps the most famous of Nashville's many handles -- is also the headquarters of the Gospel music industry and the seat of the Baptist Sunday School Board.

This fact, too, is reflected in the skyline view of the city as seen from Music Row: From this vantage point, you can easily make out two tall concrete buildings on top of which oversize, illuminated letters simply spell out the word baptist. No matter that the signs identify the now secular Baptist Hospitals, rather than any of the many publishing houses (musical or biblical) in the

city. The gigantic signs act as perpetual flashcards, reminding the city and the country music industry across town that it cannot ignore the substantial influences of its surroundings.

Whether the liberals and promoters of the city like it or not, Nashville is still better known across the country for the tourist trap that is Opryland than for the exhibits of American art on the walls of the Parthenon.

And there is no denying the deeply held conservative roots of the traditional audience for the music that comes out of this city in the middle of Tennessee and the heart of the South, roots that have given rise to yet another of Nashville's nicknames: The Buckle of the Bible Belt.

People can argue whether or not the customers who make country music a two-billion-dollar-a-year industry really hold those values. But in a culture where the perception so often bests the reality, there is little doubt that the old-time conservatives who are the stronghold of the country-music audience continue to shape -- and limit -- the progress of people with HIV in the industry.

"Nashville is all loving and supportive, on its face," says Charles "Hoss" Burns, once a high-profile country-music deejay on WSIX in Nashville (see "Good Morning, Nashville"). "But when it comes right down to it, being HIV positive can easily screw up your career and your life here. It's still not something that's easy to say in this town."

That, he says, is why no one in the country-music industry is coming out. He is skeptical about the mantra that AIDS simply hasn't hit this music community as hard as it's hit others. "Of course there were people with HIV and AIDS in the country-music industry in the early- and mid-'80s," he scoffs. "I know, because I was one of them."

In August 1995, Burns became the first -- and until this article, the only -- well-known country-music figure to go public with his HIV status. His reason was simple: Fear. There just came a time when strain of hiding outweighed the fear of letting others know.

For two other well-established figures in country music, that time is now.

In the Tennessee hills fifty miles west of Nashville, somewhere off highway 40, the winding country road turns first into a simple asphalt strip and then into a long gravel driveway before it delivers you to the 500-acre farm that has been in Brenda Hinson's family for six generations. Brenda first brought her husband, country songwriter Jimbeau Hinson, to this land 17 years ago, soon after they got married. She wanted him to see the house her great-grandfather had built for her grandparents. The house had long since fallen into disrepair, but it remained Brenda's dream to one day fix it up and move back to the farm.

Jimbeau promised her that one day they would. But at the time, he couldn't imagine living so far from the thrill of Nashville, the heart of country music, the place he had come at 17 chasing dreams. Finally, in the early '80s, he felt he was about to realize them. Farm life seemed alien for the BMW-driving songwriter. He couldn't know that, in the end, it would turn out to be his salvation.

As a child, Jimbeau Hinson accompanied his parents to the Mississippi honky-tonks and VFW dances where they went to relax and socialize. As early as five or six years old, Jimbeau discovered that for a small, skinny boy, he had a big voice. He put it to work, earning $25 a night singing with the bands that played while his mother and father and their friends danced.

At 10, he landed a gig playing guitar with Skinny Lang and the Southern Playboys, a hometown band with their own half-hour show on WBKN, the local radio station of Hinson's alcohol-free hometown of Newton, Mississippi. Soon after, he became a child celebrity. Locals would pack the dance halls, standing on tables just to hear him sing. At 15, Jimbeau Hinson made his first trip to Nashville, a bumpy, 8-hour drive to the city where he would live out his bumpy career and life.

Just as Hinson was about to sign on to a major record label as a child act, puberty got the best of his voice, and he lost his pitch. "But I had been bitten by the country-music bug," says Hinson, who decided if he couldn't be a star, he would be a songwriter. He convinced his father to buy him an old piano for $75. Every day he would sit at the keys, banging out songs he heard in his head. In 1969, by the time he was 17, Jimbeau Hinson moved to Nashville and began writing.

Though he enjoyed some early songwriting success -- he wrote several Top 20 country hits in the early '70s -- he was yearning again for a singing career. Once out of puberty, his voice stabilized and he found himself onstage once more. So in the early '70s, he packed his things and moved to Los Angeles, in the hopes of relaunching his career.

But his time in LA was short. His roots and his heart were in country music, so when his old pals, the Oak Ridge Boys, asked him to come back and write music for them in 1979, he once again took that bumpy ride back to Nashville. By the time his new wife drove him to the family farm just outside the city, Jimbeau Hinson figured everything was finally on track. In the following years, he had even been on the verge of signing a record contract on more than one occasion. He began to feel it was only a matter of time. He didn't know how right that forecast would turn out to be.

It started with the sore throats. They didn't seem serious, mostly strep infections easily taken care of by antibiotics. But Jimbeau's doctor was concerned that they were recurring so frequently. There was this new test, his doctor told him, that could detect HIV.

When the test results came back positive, Hinson knew immediately he would have to keep his illness a closely guarded secret.

"At the time, I didn't know anyone else in the business who was positive," he says. "I felt extremely alone. I thought if I told people in the industry, they would run for the hills. And they'd be chasing me out of town right in front of them," he feared.

His worst suspicions were confirmed the following year. Hinson was a member of the Nashville Entertainment Association, a group of managers, songwriters, and other industry professionals. At one meeting in a boardroom on Music Row, the question was raised about whether it would be OK to lend the group's name to an AIDS fund-raising event. The board members were indignant at the suggestion. Hinson recalls the general response was "Oh no! We can't be associated with anything

like that!”

Hinson retreated even further into the shadows of secrecy. “This was proof to me that the country-music industry would have nothing to do with me if I came out as HIV positive,” he says. “I was right smack in the middle of a red-neck business. I didn’t want to put my career on the line.”

For seven years, Jimbeau and Brenda lived with the burden of their secret, not even telling their closest friends. As Jimbeau’s depression grew worse -- and he started having side effects from some of his medications -- he decided to leave Nashville.

He remembered the promise he had made to his new bride so many years earlier, and turned his attention to fulfilling that pledge. But it soon came clear to Jimbeau that the work of restoring the farm had its own rejuvenating powers: “This place kept me alive.”

Hinson is dressed in a casual green shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. His reddish hair is thinning on the top of his head, but traces his handsomely weathered face in a short-cropped beard. As we speak, his dog, a grey, black-nosed schnauser named Lyric, repeatedly interrupts him. Laughter comes easy to Hinson these days, and the jokes are often at his own expense. There is little trace of the man who nearly had a nervous breakdown.

“This place is only about an hour’s drive from Nashville,” Hinson says, sipping a cup of coffee in the cedar-paneled house, furnished with antiques he and Brenda spent weekends scouring the country shops to find. “But it seems a lot further from the craziness and competitiveness and cutthroat of Nashville.” He smiles.

Still, Nashville trophies in the form of gold and platinum records hang proudly on the redolent wood walls to commemorate his songs recorded by Kathy Mattea, Reba McIntire, the Oak Ridge Boys and others. Hinson is back to writing music again, and in fact penned his biggest hit in 1995: “Party Crowd,” which was recorded by David Lee Murphy and climbed all the way to No. 1 on the country charts. But after a brush with death last summer, Hinson has simply decided he can no longer live in silence. “When I did, it almost killed me.”

He also hopes this interview will help cut through some of the prejudices he says are still rife in the country music industry against people with HIV. “People in country music have hearts when they’re dealing with an individual, with someone they know,” he explains. “Until we put the face of AIDS on country music, the industry will go on not caring.”

The first major country-music figure to make a public stand against AIDS was icon Minnie Pearl of the price-tag hat, when she took part in the 1989 Nashville performance of *Heartstrings*, a touring musical sponsored by the Design Industry Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA) to raise money for local charities.

The rest of the nation didn’t register country’s response, however, until 10 years into the epidemic, when singer Kathy Mattea sparked a controversy by wearing a red ribbon and explaining its significance at the 1992 *Country Music Awards*. By that time, Mattea had lost three friends to

AIDS.

“It was very scary at the time,” says Mattea, who has remained country music’s most outspoken AIDS activist. "I knew it wasn’t going to make a lot of people happy at the *Country Music Awards*.“ (Mattea had asked the CMA to help her script her speech on the issue, but, as a sign of disapproval, the CMA gave her the silent treatment.) ”I didn’t know what the reaction would be [from fans]. I didn’t know if there would be a backlash. I wasn’t stupid or naïve enough to believe that all the reaction was going to be positive."

And Mattea admits that not all of it was. But the support she has received has far outweighed any opposition, she insists. And from the very next day following her speech at the *Country Music Awards*, she now says, an unexpected number of people in the country music industry -- “including a lot of people you wouldn’t expect, a lot of people you would consider good old boys” -- have come up to her and shared personal stories about how the epidemic has affected them. “I was getting this tremendous outpouring, and I realized: There’s a whole community out there touched by AIDS who hasn’t been allowed to talk about it.” But she believes the situation has improved in the five years since she made her speech. “People [in country music] talk a lot more now about AIDS than they did back then, especially the younger audience, and that’s hopeful.”

But it’s a long way, she acknowledges, before a country-music performer could go public if he found out he was HIV positive.

“I think it would be incredibly difficult as a country-music singer to come out that way,” she says. “I certainly did risky behavior in my youth, when I knew better. I was just very lucky. But I’ve often wondered: What if I was HIV positive: Would my music be as popular? Would it sell? Would I even be allowed to perform?”

Even country music’s most ardent defenders will seldom contest that the industry responded anything but late to the epidemic. What they will defend, however, is why the response was so slow and whether it’s been up to par since.

“Given the fact that the identification and recognition of the epidemic started here a few years later than in the large coastal cities -- as was the case for many cities in the heartland -- I don’t think it took any longer for the country music industry to get involved than any other entertainment industry,” says Joe Interante, the stocky, handsome and HIV positive executive director of Nashville Cares, the city’s largest AIDS service organization.

Though AIDS cases began surfacing in Nashville as far back as 1982, Interante points out that “those numbers were extremely small.”

From his office in an imposing converted brick warehouse, Interante is reluctant to criticize the industry. Instead, he points to its current contributions, mainly the annual fundraising concert that started in 1993 on World AIDS Day. It raises an estimated $100,000 each year. (Until last year, the event was called Country Music Cares and was hosted at the Opry House. Now, it has been combined with the annual AIDS Walk, and has been renamed Music City Cares.)

Interante also points to the 1994 album release *Red Hot + Country*, put out by the New York City-based Red Hot Organization (RHO). *Red Hot + Country* featured such well-known names as Dolly Parton, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and, of course, Kathy Mattea. Brian Hanna, the album's producer, credits Mattea as the force in Nashville that made the project possible, from recruiting other artists to helping seal a recording deal.

Though Hanna says his experience with the performing artists "was universally positive," he says "there was some resistance from other aspects of the industry. Let's just say this wasn't an album that everybody in Nashville was jumping up and down to make."

Or to buy. The album ended up selling poorly, raising only $100,000 for Nashville Cares. "We certainly wish it had sold more," Hanna says. "But we did raise some money, and we raised a hell of a lot of noise."

Hanna believes the album ran into problems getting air play on country-music stations. "Country radio didn't embrace this album, and that's just the way it is," he laments. "I'm told by people in country music that the issue -- AIDS -- hurt the album's air play. I can't say I'm surprised."

But Nashville Cares' Interante, perhaps cautious not to offend some of his boot-heeled benefactors, continues to insist the industry -- and its audience -- has come around: "Overall, I think you will find an embracing of the issue that is as good as we've found in any other entertainment field. We're grateful for the support the industry is giving us."

He leaves me with three years of glossy programs from past benefits. The ads read like a country who's who: Everyone from record labels to management companies to staging experts take out full-page ads featuring AIDS ribbons and joined hands.

Even the once-resistant Country Music Association has an ad featuring the red ribbon it not-so-long ago opposed on its own award show. Everyone, it seems, wants to advertise how much they care.

One indication of just how guarded people with HIV are here is the irony of how two best friends can keep the same secret from each other for years.

Jimbeau Hinson had guarded his HIV status for three years by 1988, when he came to the aid of a mysteriously ill friend of nearly two decades, independent-record producer Dick Heard.

Heard had been in bed for several days, with friends dropping in to bring him food and check up on him. When Hinson stopped by, he was shocked at Heard's condition. Heard was thin and pale, and had lost his voice.

"You have to go see a doctor," Hinson insisted over Heard's protests, and soon Dick Heard found himself in the hospital. After several exploratory brain procedures and a battery of blood tests, Heard was stunned to learn he was HIV positive.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," recalls the 60-year-old Dick Heard today in his

elegant Nashville home, most of the rooms of which are filled with artifacts from Japan, Thailand, Indonesia and Africa. Only the framed, autographed photos of country's biggest legends in the sitting room intimates at his 30-year career in the industry. From 1982 until this past year, Heard was the Nashville producer for *Entertainment Tonight*, and he was often the man who gave a country star his or her first national television exposure. (In January, Heard jumped ship from *Entertainment Tonight* to *Access Hollywood*.)

Sitting at an enormous dining room table overlooking a fountained garden, and eating take-out hamburgers from Fat Mo's ("the best joint in the neighborhood"), Heard recounts a decade of living under the shroud of his secret. His story is punctuated with self-deprecating humor, and a new sense of openness he appears to savor.

"My attitude now is that I've lived the first 60 years of my life pleasing everybody else," he says. "I'm going to live the rest of it pleasing myself. I want to live without the pressure of having to pretend." Also, like Hinson, Heard is financially independent and works for pleasure more than money. "I'm beyond the point where rejection by a few red-neck overnight stars is going to hurt me."

Besides, he admits, grinning: As the local producer for a national media show like *Access Hollywood*, he holds the trump card.

But that wasn't always the case. In 1988, when Heard first received his diagnosis, going public with his HIV status would have meant the end of his career, he says. "It would have meant I couldn't go to someone's house and interview them, because even in those days, a lot of people thought you could catch it if someone sneezed on you. So I decided I had to keep things under wraps."

When he was released from the hospital, Heard went home and climbed into bed, prepared to die. "But it just got so boring, waiting to die." So one day he hopped out of bed, picked up his camera, and went to the Country Music Convention, where he conducted interviews and got back to business. "That restored me. If I had stayed in bed, I would have died."

Heard informed his employers at *Entertainment Tonight*, back in Los Angeles, that he was HIV positive. "It didn't matter to them," he says. "They allowed me the space I needed to get well and get back on the job."

But in Nashville, Heard told precious few, even as the years passed. But the reason had less to do with coming out about his HIV than it did with coming out about his sexuality. "Nashville's always been one big closet," he says. "Of course, this is the South, so people are terribly civilized about it. But in country music, coming out and admitting your HIV positive is not as difficult as admitting you're gay. Because you can become HIV positive a lot of different ways, and there's still that innocent victim mentality around here. But it's hard to be an innocent victim here when you're gay."

The country-music industry's inability to confront its gay citizens is, of course, one of the

numerous, vexing paradoxes of Nashville: The creative nature of the industry is a natural draw for many gay men, who work in all aspects of the industry from the music to the staging. Nashville residents are fiercely proud of the Southern city's reputation for tolerance. Singer and songwriter Janice Ian chooses to make Nashville her home, despite the fact that she is a pop artist. "Nashville is a great community for any songwriter," she explains. "As a matter of fact, I'd say there's probably no better anywhere in the country." And yet, the lesbian performer admits that "next to Gospel, country is probably the most closeted of the entire music industry." Ironically, Nashville is home to the Connection -- at 40,000 square feet, America's largest gay club.

It's clear that country music's troubled response to AIDS is due in large part to its inability to separate the disease from its prejudices against gay people. This squeamishness, however, may eventually turn out to have bitter repercussions for the heterosexual community.

"I'm sad to say it," laments Debbie Runions, a member of the President's HIV/AIDS Advisory Council, "but in Nashville, the general perception is that HIV is something that happens to 'them.'" The fact that she is a 47-year-old mother of two from rural Tennessee who contracted HIV through sex with a boyfriend, was one of the reasons she felt compelled to go public when diagnosed in 1992. Today, she does AIDS education for the state's department of education. She speaks at public schools and is filled with "horror stories" like the one she recently heard from a teenage boy: His father told him he didn't have to worry about AIDS, because God doesn't give it to straight men. "This is Bible country," she says matter-of-factly, "and we struggle with that a lot."

But don't let the squeaky-clean face of righteousness fool you, warns Don (name changed), a 52-year-old songwriter in Nashville who says he caught the virus "the Magic Johnson way."

"Nashville puts on this strong Baptist, Christian, Gospel face to the world, but it's a pretty wild town," he discloses. "People in New York and LA still have a totally different view of what the country-music life really is. They think of *Hee-Haw*, they think there's a lot of cousin-fucking going on down here," he smirks, pausing. "Well, they're only half-right: There is a lot of fucking going on down here."

Don tells stories, amazing tales of orgies where all manner of sex and drugs are readily available for the taking, stories of three, four, sometimes five sex partners a day. "I partied with a lot of people in the industry, including management of some major stars, and big-wigs from record companies," he says evenly during our conversation in a board room at a radio station on Music Row.

Sporting jeans and a t-shirt, with his grey hair tucked underneath a blue baseball cap, the soft-spoken man in front of me at first seems an unlikely candidate to have lead the impetuous lifestyle he says runs rampant in the multimillion-dollar homes in Belle Meade and Franklin, the posh sections of Nashville's nouveau riche. But the candid details he offers of his escapades -- including several braggadocio references to his apparently exceptional endowment -- give his exposition the texture of candor rather than hyperbole.

"There is an incredibly false sense of security here, because people treat this as a gay disease,"

he continues. “Look at me: I never really gave it a second thought.” Not until 1994, anyway, when he lost 30 pounds in three months and suffered repeated bouts of fatigue. By then, he was diagnosed as already having full-blown AIDS, with his T-cell count at 194. “The doctor told me I’d probably had this for years.”

His first thoughts were about his family: “Am I going to see my son graduate from high school?” he wondered. And most frighteningly, “Have I infected my wife?”

Don admits he was “a real coward” about confronting his wife. Though he stopped having sex with her, it wasn’t until a full year later that he sat down and talked to her about the situation.

When his wife eventually tested negative, the guilt started lifting enough that he could begin seeking proper treatment and start telling a very few, select number of friends. He confided in one friend, another songwriter, only to discover the man’s wife was HIV positive. “It just proved to me that it’s more common here than people admit.”

One person he did manage to tell just last November was his 13-year-old son, Jason (name changed). “He took it real well,” Don says. “Too well, I think. I worry about him a lot.”

On a sunny April afternoon, I drive with Don from Music Row across town to East Nashville, where we pick up Jason after school. Jason is a lanky bespectacled and remarkably mature 7th grader who says he knew something was wrong before he was told, because of all the pills he saw his Dad swallowing.

“A lot of tension is relieved at home, now that we can talk about it, at least in the house,” he says. “I think about him not being here a lot sometimes,” admits Jason without emotion. “But he’s here now and that’s what matters. And there’s a lot of hope, too, with the new drugs. I try to focus on that.”

Don says he would like to leave the city -- he calls it “Nash-vile” -- but he feels trapped because the most dependable way for him to make a living now is to continue writing songs.

“But I’m not in a trance over the country music industry like I used to be, like a lot of people are,” he shrugs. “Because I know all about the hypocrisy between this town’s country-music capital, and the reality of what goes on here.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Down-and-Out-in-Nashville-1741-8270