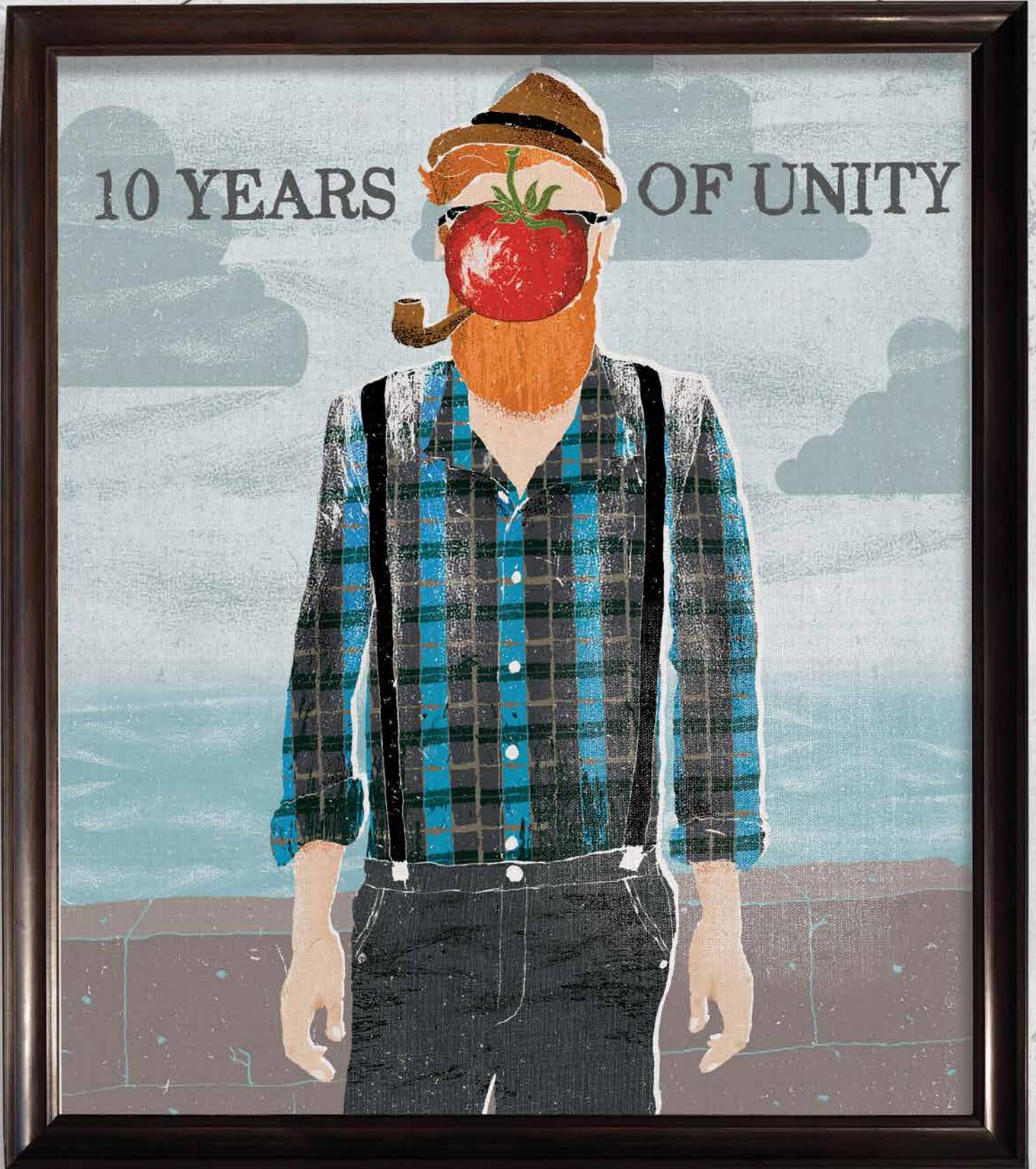


the **EAST NASHVILLIAN**

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Spanish ECLECTIC

The continuing
adventures of
LITTLE
HOLLYWOOD

By Gary Wolf

East Nashville's quirkiest neighborhood is an eclectic collection of historic infill, old and new, which mirrors and reveals the history that shaped it. Fifteen Spanish-style homes in the several-block area define its curious out-of-time, out-of place look, and no doubt gave the popular walking area nestled into the northwest corner of Shelby Golf Course its name. Its actual origins, however, are a mystery even to the Historical Commission and Metro Archives, where no record exists of the popular but unofficial designation, "Little Hollywood."

As it turns out, the few blocks span two subdivisions. What might be thought of as Little Hollywood's Main Street, lower Lakehurst Drive, was merely the slim northern edge of C.L. Sexton's 1925 purchase of "Richardson Place" from William Richardson, the last of the family to own the much larger plantation that was originally a land grant to a Revolutionary War soldier and lent its name – Lockeland – to the surrounding housing boom in the late 1800s.

Nora and Church Sexton's \$4,500 purchase – a few hills and ravines of remnant forest

– was the last difficult-to-develop corner pocket of the Lockeland Springs area and is now part of its conservation overlay zone. The 1925 deed sought to preserve something else, stipulating that no part of Richardson Place would be "sold, alienated, conveyed or devised to any person or persons of African blood or descent."

Sexton and his son Paul would build a number of houses on that 10-acre tract and in the surrounding neighborhood over the next couple of decades, and perhaps throughout larger East Nashville, as the scattering of Spanish-style homes there might suggest. The Spanish style was in vogue. Nearby Shelby Park, only a decade old, featured a Spanish-style Mission House, and the park's swimming pool, built while Sexton was at work on his houses, had that California look. The Spanish style of the Woodland Theater is barely visible under the expanded façade of Woodland Studios at 5 Points, but the movies from Hollywood had become a popular draw there just a few years before Sexton bought his land.

Ordway Place – Grove Avenue then – already ran to the northwest corner of what had recently become the city's first municipal golf course. The south side of Ordway was the





southern end of the McEwen subdivision. It wasn't part of Sexton's land but neighbored it, and the three Spanish houses on Ordway include his signature Spanish-style touches, as do others up Bushnell, Lakehurst and Avondale: block walls with rounded tiles on top of the parapets surrounding the flat roofs, and the arches, both round and stepped.

Like Little Hollywood, the Spanish houses weren't all on Sexton's land, and not all of his homes were Spanish-style. The one house on that last stretch of Ordway's south side that isn't Spanish was certainly built by Sexton. A little girl who grew up there remembers him 80 years later as the kindly neighbor who fixed her bike and her sled as well as the man who sold his own house to her parents, the house his family lived in and he'd no doubt built.

"A good memory of Mr. Sexton," Anne Doyle reminisced for Larry Brown, current owner of her childhood home and curator of the lovely garden that is Little Hollywood's "town center" at Ordway and Lakehurst, where a creek once ran and her mother had gardens. "He was so friendly! Didn't realize it then, but he was the father figure to me. I was about 9 or 10. We all loved him." Doyle's family had moved there after the Crash of 1929 forced them from their Belle Meade home (in the "poor folks section" of Belle Meade, she notes).

It's possible that the Spanish-style houses were themselves a reaction to the difficult economic times. A 19th-century invention, concrete blocks became a popular and economical building material in the early 1900s. Spanish-style houses became popular in the 1920s as Hollywood became a focal point for American culture, with architectural plans and kits available in magazines at the time. Putting the two together meant an affordable house with a creative flair, reminiscent of movie star homes but much less pricey, a bit of fun during hard times.

Doyle believes the "Little Hollywood moniker" was a post-war invention, but she recalls the houses there having been built mostly in the 1930s and early '40s. She remembers first hearing the name in 1948.

Lillian Hawkins, who has lived next door to Doyle's childhood home since 1960, remembers Doyle's mother as "Granny Gardener." It was her name, but her gardens were a local landmark recalled by the current garden. Hawkins doesn't remember the Sextons, who had moved on by then. Son Paul Sexton lived in the family house at 1810 Lakehurst after the war, according to the 1946 city directory, and has visited the neighborhood since, but the family's contribution to Nashville's architectural diversity has largely gone unrecorded over time.

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"The neighborhood had really gone down" in the post-war years, Doyle recalls. The Little Hollywood homes, too, but especially "those crackerboxes" that had filled in the smaller lots up to McEwen, which "had lost all their good tenants ... the area had really deteriorated."

A trend from ownership to rental properties at least coincided with that deterioration. East Nashville beyond Little Hollywood developed a grittier reputation with Nashville's suburbanization and the decline of downtown. That lasted until the destructive tornado of 1998 ironically revitalized East Nashville and its real-estate values.

Desirable from the beginning, early East Nashville featured summer mansions for the wealthy. With the construction of bridges across the Cumberland to downtown, the large tracts were subdivided into worker homes. The narrower lots of the McEwen Subdivision emphasized that trend; many of the houses were so small they were built on several adjoining lots. But Little Hollywood, especially lower Lakehurst, was different. Unlike the Spanish-style houses a block away, these were on wide lots, accommodating a new development in housing: The attached garage. Automobiles had become more commonplace by the 1930s and architecture integrated them with the living unit. With wide lots and local-only traffic, the woodsy remnant was an early suburb in the inner city before it became Little Hollywood.

Called variously Spanish Colonial, Spanish Revival or Mission Style, the architectural label that fits Little Hollywood best is "Spanish Eclectic." With window and interior trim styles right out of the Craftsman-style building trades, the houses are Tennessee Spanish as much as Californian. Unusually colored concrete tiles, probably from Mexico, are among the many original details that marked the Sexton homes, Spanish-style or not, though they are mostly gone or covered up by remodeling now. Arches are another trademark. The home Sexton built for his daughter, Virginia, at 1809 Lakehurst features two-dozen arches inside and out. Even the fireplaces in these houses are matching sunburst patterns of arched brick. Sexton himself didn't live in a Spanish-style home. Rather, he built his Craftsman house – his second – facing the golf course. Master carpenter Chris Keenan lives there now and has added his own touches to the interior, keeping with the spirit of the original, though the Spanish tiles in the bathroom are gone.

The stylistically novel neighborhood has also attracted residents with a creative flair, most notably Nashville's musicians. Urban legend puts Marty Robbins at 1807 Lakehurst, a house that might have inspired a song about old El Paso – and where

Lillian Hawkins remembers a producer living back in the '60s, and hearing the blended harmonies of that outlaw country group, the Glaser Brothers, singing on the landmark wide veranda over the double garage.

That would have been Hillous Butrum's house. The former bass player for Hank Williams and later Marty Robbins had become a record producer by the time the Hawkinses moved to the neighborhood. Butrum's grandson visited from Chicago a half-century later looking for his Nashville roots in Little

Hollywood, where his grandmother, Butrum's girlfriend, had once lived and for a time raised their daughter, the young Chicagoan's mother.

One or both of the Everly Brothers reportedly lived in the Spanish house across the street. Legendary sessions guitarist Grady Martin supposedly was in the house on the corner. Though not quite in Little Hollywood, Johnny Paycheck's drummer lived at the house by the bus stop on Ordway, and Jimmy Buffett lived a couple blocks down the street early in his career. Danny Ramsey had his



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Little Hollywood recording studio where the Glaser Brothers sang for “Bew” Butrum. Larry Hanson, longtime Alabama guitarist who’s now back to his original gig touring with Bill Medley of Righteous Brothers fame, lived next door until a few years ago and still has a studio and several rental houses in the ‘hood.

The creative community still calls Little Hollywood home, including touring guitarist Brian Langlinai; singer-songwriter Josie Kuhn; former Gerst House hostess/house singer Jan, aka “Rose;” songwriters like Craig Lackey and Elizabeth Wright; and Ketch Secor of Old Crow Medicine Show. Even carpenter Keenan in the Sexton family

Not even the plunking-down of a faux-Spanish moderno right outside his studio window could detract from his love of the bucolic neighborhood five minutes from downtown. His banjo playing on the back porch blends with the full-throated songbirds that populate the neighborhood full of mature trees.

Barred owls still fly through the treetops with one nest in Little Hollywood proper and another in the old Sexton woods below it. Herons often visit the golf course pond bordering Little Hollywood at the green of the 11th hole. Pileated woodpeckers haven’t been seen since the 1998 tornado, though, and raccoons and possums haven’t been seen since new houses started being built in the neigh-

“Donut Pond,” an unnatural watering hole not on the Department of Public Health’s maps and probably created by the concrete storm sewer. Its construction turned the creek between the Hawkins’ home and the street into a wide, flat neighborhood playground a half-century ago but is attracting developers’ attention now.

The famed Lockeland Spring itself is but a short walk up the hill, the Richardson family mausoleum site even closer below Ordway, and somewhere nearby is the first home site in the area – a 1786 cabin built by that Revolutionary War soldier. The tangled woods behind Lockeland Elementary are now an undeveloped natural area managed by Metro Parks.

Johnny Paycheck’s drummer lived at the house by the bus stop on Ordway, and Jimmy Buffett lived a couple blocks down the street

house is a former musician and roadie audio man. Miss Margaret, as current neighbors knew the elderly woman in the imposing brick house at the end of Ordway before she died a few years ago, ran one of the more popular downtown hotel honky-tonks. Her husband, Jimmy Hyde, ran a club in Printer’s Alley back before liquor-by-the-drink was legal. Todd Snider may be the most (in)famous among the neighborhood’s current musical residents. His own quirkiness fits the neighborhood so well that one of his more popular albums is “East Nashville Skyline.”

Americana artist and painter Kieran Kane lives in one of the original Spanish houses.

borhood a few years ago for the first time since World War II.

Eight have been built within two blocks. One modern Spanish house was built a couple of years ago at Lakehurst and Ordway, where a pond existed a half century ago next to what was probably the original Spanish house. This new home was given a Preservation Award by the Historical Commission this year in the “infill” category. Three of the new houses echo the Spanish style and the others emphasize the neighborhood’s eclectic side. Several more are reportedly planned for the wooded area on the southern half of Sexton’s 10 acres, populated now only by critters frequenting

Public discussion when that park was being created offered hope the rest of what used to be Church Sexton’s woods between the park and the golf course would also be protected, but rising property values may make development hard to resist.

Ironically, the infill precedent now claiming Little Hollywood’s open spaces may actually have been set by Church Sexton himself, and the eclectic style of the infill may be true to his blending of Spanish-eclectic homes and more conventional architecture. The variety is pleasant, and the neighborhood’s development may defy rules – a recipe for creativity in most any business. ☑



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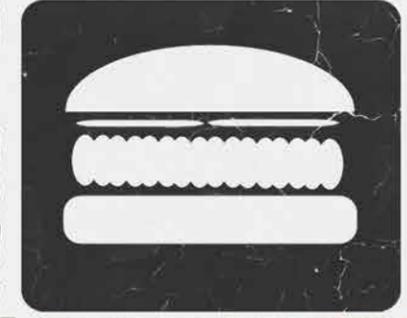
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