

Survey and Research Report on the Arthur Smith Studios



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Arthur Smith Studios is located at 5457 Monroe Road, Charlotte, N.C.

2. Name and address of the current owner of the property:

Terraca Properties LLC
1075 South State Street Unit 4
Sandy, Utah 84070

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property:



5. Current Tax Parcel Reference and Deed to the property: The tax parcel number for the property is 16302142. The most recent deed for the property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Books 29522 page 490.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Susan Mayer.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by Stewart Gray.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural importance:

The Commission judges that the property known as the Arthur Smith Studios possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The Arthur Smith Studios is significant for its association with Arthur Smith, a noted musician, songwriter, and entertainer. Smith, who lived in Charlotte from 1943 until his death in 2014, was arguably Charlotte's the most successful, important, and influential musician.

2) The Arthur Smith Studios is significant for its association with many popular recording artists including Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash (a personal friend of Smith), Chet Atkins, Pat Boone, and

James Brown, who in 1965 recorded his seminal hit “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” at the studio.

3) The Arthur Smith Studios is an important artifact of the post-World War II music business in Charlotte.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Arthur Smith Studios meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the property is \$299,700.

10. Portion of the Property Recommended for Designation: The exterior of the building, and the land associated with tax parcel.

11. Date of Preparation of this Report: February 15, 2015

Prepared by: Stewart Gray, Mary Dominick, and Susan Mayer

Historical Essay

Arthur Smith Studios is significant due to its founding and ownership by Arthur Smith, a noted musician, songwriter, and entertainer who placed Charlotte on the map as a national destination in the music and television industry. Smith first became known locally with his band for his radio shows; later, Smith obtained national attention with his instrumental singles “Guitar Boogie” and “Feudin’ Banjos” as well as his long-running syndicated television show *The Arthur Smith Show*. He opened Arthur Smith Studios in 1957; and over the years major musical acts recorded at the studio, among the most notable acts the “Godfather of Soul” James Brown. For over a decade, Arthur Smith Studios was the only recording studio in the Carolinas, and continues as the oldest under its current name Studio East. As *Charlotte Observer* writer Ken Garfield noted, “There are two kinds of people in the Carolinas: Those who know that Arthur Smith is as much a part of the Southern landscape as Billy Graham and grits. And those who don’t.”¹

Arthur Smith

Arthur Smith was born in Clinton, South Carolina, in 1921 and grew up in the textile town of Kershaw. His father Clayton worked at a mill as a loom fixer and also directed the local orchestra. Smith demonstrated at a young age proficiency in music; and his father taught him to play several instruments including the trumpet, mandolin, and fiddle. By age thirteen, Smith had signed a recording contract with RCA; and two years later he was hosting a radio show in on WOLS in Florence, South Carolina. By the early 1940s, the Arthur Smith Quartet performed a daily show on WSPA in Spartanburg, South Carolina. The Dixieland music they played was less popular in the area, though. Smith switched the band to country and renamed it Arthur Smith

and the Carolina Crackerjacks. In 1943, the band moved to Charlotte to perform on the WBT radio show *Carolina Hayride*.²

During World War II Smith joined the Navy. Stationed near Washington, D.C., Smith continued his involvement in music with recording sessions at Super Disc Records. His instrumental single, "Guitar Boogie," became a hit in 1946 as the first country guitar recording to sell over one million records and became synonymous with Smith.³ Following the war, Smith returned to Charlotte and resumed his performances on WBT radio. Smith's *The Arthur Smith Quartet* folk music and *Arthur Smith and His Crackerjacks* country music shows helped WBT win the first Billboard Local Program Competition in Folk-Western music in 1948. The magazine noted that "it was Smith's digital dexterity which stood out."⁴ The station began television broadcasts in July 1949, and two years later Smith and his band were part of the first locally-produced live television show on the channel.⁵



Cast of *The Arthur Smith Show* from the 1960s. Smith is at the top right holding a guitar.

From this point forward, Arthur Smith would be a fixture on WBT and WBTW programming. Starting on WBT radio and continuing as a telecast, the *Carolina Calling* morning variety show starred Smith and his band the Crackerjacks and featured notable guests such as Andy Griffith, Loretta Lynn, and future president Richard Nixon in 1964, who played “Home on the Range” on the piano. The *Top of the Morning* radio show also featured Smith, and ran for thirty years. But Smith’s best known television project was *The Arthur Smith Show*, one of the first country music variety shows to be syndicated. The show would run for thirty two years.⁶

Smith moved over to WSOC in 1971 to have more control of sales and production of his syndicated programs. George Hamilton IV, a native of Matthews and member of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, resigned his position to join the show. Smith moved forward with plans to

nationally syndicate the show, which was shown in fourteen Southern markets at that time. By the late 1970s, *The Arthur Smith Show* was aired on over sixty stations throughout the country.⁷



Arthur Smith and Don Reno, recorders of “Feudin’ Banjos.” From *Our State* magazine.

Arthur Smith continued to write and record music while producing radio and television programming. A devout Christian, Smith had also formed a gospel band, *Arthur Smith and the Crossroads Quartet*, which recorded throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁸ In 1955 Smith and longtime contributor Don Reno recorded an instrumental banjo duet at WBT, the former playing the tenor banjo and the latter on the five-string banjo, entitled “Feudin’ Banjos.” The song did not receive widespread acclaim until its inclusion in a now iconic scene in the 1972 movie *Deliverance*. Warner Bros., the distributor of the film, failed to credit Smith as writer of the song; Smith would later successfully sue and settle out of court with the company.⁹

Arthur Smith Studios

Nashville, Tennessee, is considered the country music capital of the United States. Arthur Smith, however, lived in Charlotte and wanted to bring recording work closer to home. In 1957 Smith opened his own recording studio, Arthur Smith Studios, in a retrofitted barn behind his house on Smithfield Drive in Charlotte. He drew many of his ideas for his studio from studios in Nashville—Smith wanted to have ample recording space to accommodate large bands. In 1964, at a cost of \$33,100, a new 3,366 square foot building was constructed at 5457 Monroe Road across from the Sharon Gardens cemetery. Four years later, Smith expanded the building 1,056 square feet to add office space.¹⁰

Studio time was sold in four hour increments and ran through all hours of the night. In 1965 local band “The Grifs” scheduled a recording session from 8:00 p.m. to midnight. The band wanted to stay longer, but the studio manager said they had to hurry and finish within their time slot, because James Brown was coming in at midnight for his session.¹¹

Arthur Smith Studios’s reputation spread via word of mouth, since Smith was well-known in the music industry. Many popular artists recorded at the studio, including Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash (a personal friend of Smith), Chet Atkins, Pat Boone, and George Hamilton IV. Arthur Smith Studios also was a popular draw for regional bands, considering it was the only recording studio in the Carolinas, and many would come to the studio to record for Smith’s Pyramid Records label. Following the release of *Deliverance* and the subsequent lawsuit, Smith received increased media attention which only served to increase the popularity of his recording studio and other projects.¹²

One of the most notable events at Arthur Smith Studios occurred in February 1965, when James Brown recorded his hit single “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” at the studio. Brown

returned to the studio the next year and recorded another hit, “Don’t Be A Dropout.”¹³ For years afterwards, artists would come to Arthur Smith Studios “where James Brown recorded.”¹⁴

Arthur Smith Studios did not just produce artist recording sessions. Among Smith’s projects were movie soundtracks, commercial jingles, and, most importantly, original radio programming.¹⁵ Christian evangelist Billy Graham recorded his *Hour of Decision* radio show at Arthur Smith Studios. Smith also produced and edited his own *Top of the Morning* radio show, which ran for thirty years, at his studio, as well as radio shows for Johnny Cash and George Beverly Shea.¹⁶

Arthur Smith Studios was remodeled in 1976, with \$30,000 spent on acoustic improvements to the control room. Smith prided himself in providing state-of-the-art equipment and recording spaces for artists, noting that “people who know claim that my studio is one of the best in the nation, along with the Creative Workshop studio in Nashville and the Soundstage studio in Los Angeles.”¹⁷

In 1981 Smith sold a 90 percent stake in Arthur Smith Studios to real estate developer Nick Hice of Hice Music Group for over \$500,000. Hice was a former musician from Fayetteville who had been active in broadcast property and real estate development. Smith would be chairman of the board of Hice Music and continue to handle music publishing and production at the studio. The sale relieved Smith of the day-to-day administrative responsibilities of the studio while freeing him to focus on his music, radio, and television programming work.¹⁸



**Recording session at StudioEast, January 2011. From StudioEast Recording, Inc.,
Facebook page.**

Post-Smith Legacy

In the 1980s, the stature and success of Arthur Smith Studios as a destination recording studio began to decline after its sale. Reflection Studios on Central Avenue had opened in 1973 and, by the late 1970s, was drawing younger, up and coming acts such as REM. While this occurrence was partially due to the cyclical nature of the music industry, poor management also led to the tarnishing of the Arthur Smith Studios's name.¹⁹

In the mid 1980s, Tim Eaton purchased the embattled studio and renamed it StudioEast. Eaton faced an uphill battle to restore the good reputation of the former Arthur Smith Studios.

One indication of his success was achieved in 1991, when John Mellencamp broadcast a special interview and live performance from StudioEast as part of his syndicated radio show on Westwood One radio network. The primary reason why Mellencamp worked at StudioEast was because James Brown had recorded there.²⁰

Smith remained active in the recording studio until about 2008 or 2009, when he produced his last session at StudioEast. Smith died at his home on April 3, 2014, two days after his ninety-third birthday.²¹

As noted by music historian Daniel Coston, “finding a studio like Arthur Smith that is there, still operating, still largely intact from when it was formed in the late 1950s is rare anywhere in the country.”²² Historic spaces like Arthur Smith Studios are rare and often endangered properties. In Charlotte, Reflection Studios was recently demolished. In Nashville, an ongoing effort to preserve RCA Victor Studio A in Nashville is finding success.²³ Arthur Smith Studios, Charlotte’s and the Carolinas’ first recording studio, is an exemplary intact part of Southern music and entertainment history.

Architectural Description



The Arthur Smith Studios was built in 1964. The two-story, flat-roofed, masonry building faces south, and is set back approximately ninety feet from Monroe Road. The lot is .35 acres. The building is closely bordered on either side with low-rise commercial buildings that date from the 1980s. The façade features three prominent bays centered on the facade. Each bay contains a large, wide, two-light direct glazed window with a prominent masonry sill. The windows on the second story are of the same size and design, and align with the windows on the first story. Set near the western edge of the façade is a single doorway, with a replacement wood panel door. The door is sheltered by an original cantilevered portico that features two prominent horizontal bands and recessed lighting. The portico is now covered with a barrel-shaped canvas awning.





The Arthur Smith Studios is a brick building. Tan Roman brick, a large brick also referred to as utility brick, was used on the façade. The brick is laid in a modified common bond. Every five courses of stretcher brick is topped with a course that features one stretcher brick, one shortened stretcher, and one header brick that projects approximately one inch. The only exception to this pattern is a single course of headers is laid near the top of the second story window openings. This unusual bond is also used on the other elevations. The façade features a low parapet topped with metal cap.



The tan brick used on the façade wraps around and clads a portion of the side elevations. The east elevation features a large two-light window (like that found on the façade) set close to the front of the building, with an identical window set above it piercing the second story.

Approximately twelve feet from the front of the building, the brick on the east side elevation change color from tan to red. The red brick are also large Roman brick, and the wall is laid in the same modified common bond with projecting headers. Immediately past the brick transition, the second story is pierced with a large single-light window. Half the width of the windows used on the façade, the single-light window also features a substantial masonry sill. The parapet on the façade wraps around to the side elevations, and ends where the brick color changes. The red-brick portion of the side elevations is four courses shorter than the parapet sections and is topped with continuous aluminum gutter.



Like the east elevation, the west elevation features a transition from tan to red bricks. The tan portion of the east elevation is blank. In the red-brick portion of the east elevation the first story is pierced by two narrow, direct-glazed, single-light windows. Above these window, the second story is pierced by two narrow, direct-glazed, single-light windows. The rearmost second-story window is shorter than the others. To the rear of the windows is a door opening protected by a low-slope, corrugated metal canopy. The canopy is supported by wooden posts, and does not appear to be original.



The door opening features an outer and an inner slab door. This layered door arraignment was done for soundproofing. Adjacent to the door is an original recessed light fixture that warned visitors when a recording session was taking place. The fixture's glass screen is missing.



Four years after the studio was opened Arthur Smith added a one-story, brick addition to the rear of the building to expand the recording space. The flat-roof addition covers the full width of the rear of the principal section of the building, but is shorter, leaving the blank expanse of the rear wall's second-story exposed. The addition is constructed using the same red Roman brick used on the side elevations of the principal section of the building. The brick is laid in the same modified common bond found on the rest of the building, with every five courses of stretcher brick topped with a course that features one stretcher brick, one shortened stretcher, and one header brick that projects approximately one inch. The brick walls are topped with a simple metal cap. The east and rear elevations are blank.



The west elevation of the addition is blank except for a single-light aluminum door, sheltered by a flat-roof canopy, supported by wooden posts.

¹ Ken Garfield, "Carolinas Country Music Icon to Perform Benefit Concert," *Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1995.

² Frye Galliard, *Race, Rock, and Religion: Profiles from a Southern Journalist* (Charlotte, NC: East Woods Press, 1982), 89-90; Don Rhodes, "Arthur Smith: A Wide and Varied Musical Career," *Bluegrass Unlimited* 12, No. 1 (July 1977): 20-23; Arthur Smith obituary, *Charlotte Observer*, April 10, 2014.

³ Doug Smith, "Real Estate Mogul Acquires Charlotte 24-Tracker," *Billboard* (July 11, 1981): 33.

⁴ "Art Smith's Guitar Wins for WBT in 50-Kw. Folk Music," *Billboard* (May 8, 1948): 15.

⁵ "Chronology of WBT," WBTv.com, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.wbtv.com/story/10534472/chronology-of-wbtv>.

⁶ Smith obituary; Rhodes.

⁷ “Smith and Crackerjacks Will Begin TVer with Hamilton,” *Billboard* (April 3, 1971): 66; “G. Hamilton Leaves ‘Opry’; Joins Arthur Smith TV Cast,” *Billboard* (July 8, 1972): 39; “‘Arthur Smith Show’ Plans A Drive to Go Nationwide,” *Billboard* (April 3, 1971): 3.

⁸ Stambler, Irwin and Grelun Landon, eds., “Smith, Arthur,” *Country Music: The Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 444.

⁹ Galliard, 91-92; Smith obituary.

¹⁰ Charlotte, N.C. Building Permit No. 74205, November 19, 1963, Arthur Smith vertical file, Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library; Charlotte, N.C. Building Permit No. 10406, December 20, 1967, Arthur Smith vertical file, Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

¹¹ Coston interview.

¹² Interview with Daniel Coston, Mary C. Dominick, December 30, 2014; Galliard, 92; *Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1995; Doug Smith, “Real Estate Mogul Acquires Charlotte 24-Tracker,” *Billboard* (July 11, 1981): 33.

¹³ Smith obituary; Coston interview.

¹⁴ Email correspondence with Daniel Coston, Mary C. Dominick, December 28, 2014.

¹⁵ Doug Smith, “Real Estate Mogul Acquires Charlotte 24-Tracker,” *Billboard* (July 11, 1981): 33.

¹⁶ Rhodes; Smith obituary.

¹⁷ Rhodes.

¹⁸ Galliard, 92; Doug Smith, “Real Estate Mogul Acquires Charlotte 24-Tracker,” *Billboard* (July 11, 1981): 33.

¹⁹ Coston interview.

²⁰ Advertisement for John Mellencamp: The Carolina Shag Session, Arthur Smith Studios vertical file, Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

²¹ Coston interview; Smith obituary.

²² Coston interview.

²³ “RCA Studio A ‘Saved’ by Nashville Philanthropist,” RollingStone.com, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://radio.com/2014/10/08/rca-studio-a-saved-sold-nashville-philanthropist-aubrey-preston/>.