

THE THRILL OF SOUTHERN NOIR

a review by Andrew K. Clark

Michael Amos Cody. *Streets of Nashville*. Madville Publishing, 2025.

ANDREW K. CLARK is from Western North Carolina where his people settled before the Revolutionary War. His poetry collection, *Jesus in the Trailer* (Main Street Rag Press, 2019), was shortlisted for the Able Muse Book Award. His debut novel, *Where Dark Things Grow* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2024) was shortlisted for the Manly Wade Wellman Award and won an IPPY from the Independent Book Publishers Awards followed by a sequel, *Where Dark Things Rise* (Quill and Crow Publishing House, 2025). His work has appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Appalachian Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, and many other journals. He received his MFA from Converse College.

MICHAEL AMOS CODY grew up in the community of Walnut, within Madison County, NC. He has a PhD in English from USC and is a Professor in the Department of Literature and Language at East Tennessee State University. His works have been finalists for the 2025 American Fiction Awards and the Killer Nashville Claymore Award and first place finalist in the Short Story for the 2022 Feathered Quill Book Awards.

They say the music never stops in Nashville, TN, and if you've ever spent time there you know it's true. Once, many years ago, I was on a trip to the city when my friends and I retired to our hotel rooms on what I believe locals would call Lower Broadway at about midnight. In my room, I heard the thump of the bass and pluck of guitars in the bars outside my window. I wasn't mad at it, but I couldn't sleep, so after a few hours I found myself getting up and dressed to head back out: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. It's true the music never stopped, but I think the volume on Lower Broadway was lowered a bit at about five or six in the morning when I finally made it back to my room.

Michael Amos Cody's *Streets of Nashville* captures the soul of Music City, the notion that the music never stops, that it is everywhere, as much a part of the city as the streets and buildings. Like the music sounding in my hotel room, music rings through the pages of this novel. Country music, of course, but also, because the book is set primarily in 1989, we hear '80s music in bars, restaurants, and echoing from the open windows of the cars in the streets. The main character, Ezra MacRae, hears the music with us, but as a songwriter and student of music he has an academic interest in each lyric and how it fits into the world. Each time a song is introduced into the narrative, MacRae recounts the songwriter's name, as in "'Naughty Naughty' – John Parr, Songwriter" (252).

Beyond this professional interest in the business of music, we feel the weight of music in

the novel as a spiritual entity of its own, propelling Ezra and the other characters along, giving them the language and means to understand the world around them, to try to make sense of it all. As a poet, I loved interludes in the novel when Ezra's song lyrics are shared, often at the end of a chapter. These sections allow us to see the progression of Ezra's song ideas, which he jots down in a notebook and which are influenced by the events in his life, as they morph into fully realized lyrics:

jesus came to me
my lonely and me
just before he made it rain
I asked him for a cigarette
and he give me one
I offered him my beer
and he said keep it son. (31)

Ezra, like many artists, has a day gig to pay the bills: he cleans swimming pools, often for famous Country music stars around Nashville in areas like Brentwood. As he tries to realize his dream of becoming a songwriter, he feels the pull of his hometown, Runion, NC, where his best friend and his parents live and where he knows he will wind up if the songwriting gig doesn't work out.

In the midst of this struggle, Ezra witnesses a shooting. The killer sees him but doesn't kill him, setting up the thriller bones of this story, in which our concerns shift from hoping Ezra finds success as a songwriter to hoping he will somehow survive. There are more murders, and soon authorities realize they have a serial killer on their hands – a serial killer who knows who Ezra is and where he lives and who stalks him



COURTESY OF CHRISTY ALEXANDER HALLBERG, ROCK IS LIT

as the novel progresses, both in reality, and in the fears that blossom in Ezra's mind.

At its core, *Streets of Nashville* is a crime thriller in the vein of the best noir literature. But it struck me, reading the novel, that, while much has been written about both rural and urban noir, the focus of urban noir tends to be centered on the largest US cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. What we don't see as often is Southern city noir, the assumption being that Southern noir must always be rural, must always be banjos on the front porch and swamp witches. In *Streets of Nashville*, the city takes center stage, the characters navigating its twists and turns as Ezra's terror deepens: "Beneath a vivid blue sky, he moved along with the growing

sense that these beloved streets of Nashville – streets that had always seemed a kind of wonderland to his creative mind – had become blood-haunted and threatening" (209).

As much as Cody captures place in his novel he also captures the sense of what it was like to live in the late 1980s. Cody's Southerners explain the mysteries of the world in the context of their Southern religious tradition that feels like a mix of superstition and Biblical rigidity. Ezra's dad is a preacher, and while we don't get the sense he judges Ezra harshly for wanting to write secular music in Nashville, I couldn't help but feel a comparison to the character Preacher Boy in the movie *Sinners*, whose pastor father warns him not to pursue blues

music, as it is a path to wickedness. Ezra seems to internalize a sense of guilt and conflict. Cody also explores what it was like to be gay during the 1980s, with fears of religious judgment, persecution, all under the dark shadow of the AIDS epidemic.

An important part of any good thriller is the unveiling of the killer at the center of the story. Here, Cody doesn't disappoint. We learn early on that we are dealing with a true psychopath in the story, with the killer's motivations masterfully revealed slowly over the course of the novel, keeping us engaged with the mystery. Clues are left along the way, and as we're strung along with Ezra, we collect them and try to figure out where the pieces might fit, why he's doing what he's doing, and why he's so damned creepy.

If I have one criticism of the novel it would be that an important character when the novel opens doesn't figure into the closure the novel offers for other characters, after playing a pivotal role in a particularly traumatic scene. I wanted to know how she dealt with the trauma and her resolution alongside the other characters.

This novel will please readers of Southern literature, fans of rural and urban noir, and those who love true crime documentaries and podcasts. One more thing: before you sit down to read this book, pick yourself up a large chocolate milk and a Moon Pie (IYKYK) and put on the song "More Than This" by Roxy Music (songwriter Bryan Ferry). Trust me. ■

ABOVE Michael Amos Cody (left) with Peter McDade and NCLR Senior Associate Editor Christy Hallberg on her podcast, *Rock Is Lit*, 15 Apr. 2025 ([Listen here.](#))