

WeHome, Episode 4 Transcript:
Long-haulers

AMELIA BRIGGS: How do you find meaning in making work if no one is looking? Or if no one will look? Or if it will just pile up in your basement? You have to dig deep about why are you are doing this.

ERICA CICCARONE: WeHome is a podcast about the Wedgewood-Houston and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee where history, policy, people, business interests, and housing intersect in a way that says a lot about the future of Nashville. If you don't live here, you might find that the stories we uncover apply to your neighborhood, too. Each episode, we bring you on the ground to hear from a chorus of South Nashville voices. Then, two community members tour each other's lives and tell each other stories. I'm Erica Ciccarone. Today's episode is called Long-haulers.

In any neighborhood, people have concerns. Here are some of ours.

EC: Is there anything you'd like to see changed, preserved, or added in the neighborhood?

CHORUS OF VOICES:

The tree canopy, the sidewalks. Would love to see more ways to control speed as we're a major cut-through multiple corridors...

I'd like to see more sidewalks, I mean that's a given, everybody wants that. And maybe more trees...

I'd love to be able to see the long-term residents keep living in their houses. We're losing a lot already just in the last two years. A lot of the new houses that have been built that are way of out scale for the neighborhood...

I worry about the rate of development, and I worry about the lack of mindfulness in how we're developing, that there's not the right infrastructure to support all these people. It's as basic as, do we have enough four-way stops? Are the streets wide enough?

In Wedgewood-Houston right now, I want to make sure we're keeping our affordable housing stock. We have a lot of neighbors now who are kind of on the edge of whether they're going to be able to afford the neighborhood, and I want to see them stay.

It's a natural cycle that we see in cities all over the country where the creative community sort of brings attention to places that have become neglected, and at that point they become popular and developed, and then the creative community has to move on.

So I'm also really concerned about the Greer Stadium property, and I think we have a wonderful opportunity to restore the park to its entirety. I would hate to see us squander that. Once you build housing and retail on a property, that's really it. You lose the sense that it's a piece of property for everyone, which is what park land is. I also think in 20 years, we're gonna be surrounded by townhouses and homes and condominiums and apartment buildings, and we're gonna really wish we had 16 extra acres of park land to enjoy.

EC: It's a Saturday morning at the SNAP community center in Wedgewood-Houston, and residents sit around two clumps of folding tables that are covered with scrap paper, sheets of vellum, markers, rulers, and importantly, maps of the neighborhood.

Neighbor: That's one great thing about this site that's important and of note is the scene between the more commercial activity and more of the residents, so this is an opportunity for kind of the new and the old to come together... Nice job writing upside down.

EC: They've been asked basically to daydream together about what they'd like to see here in the near future. The organizers call them Neighborhood Design Workshops.

Neighbor: This would be kind of interesting to art bikes, like b-cycle, since we have the art crawl. If we got a bunch of old bikes and go the kids to paint them...

Eric Malo: My name's Eric Malo. I'm a cofounder of Converge with my wife Alysha. We moved here in September 2008, so nine years ago. We began hosting these Neighborhood Design Workshops. We've had five or six at this point, and our goal with the workshops is to bring individuals together and to brainstorm ideas for positive growth in our neighborhood. The neighborhood has been changing significantly in the past five to ten years. There's lots of new growth. Developers have been buying small lots of land and combining them and doing larger developments, or buying industrial lots and doing zoning changes for larger developments. Several years ago, we felt like there wasn't good communication between developers doing projects in the neighborhood and the neighbors themselves. We wanted to make sure that neighbors could have a voice in the process. Several of us wanted to make sure that the growth was smart and intentional.

Design professional: I think it reinforces that this bridge could be an incredible experience and introduction to the neighborhood, so when people cross over it, they know that they're coming into someplace special that people care about. It's a space that evokes feeling and they want to be a part of that energy.

EM: Some of the workshops are specific to certain projects a developer will be working on. And some of the workshops are less specific and focus on general neighborhood infrastructure or public space. And in all of the cases, what we do is we bring neighbors—there's an open invitation to everyone in the neighborhood and friends and others—we also invite developers, and we invite design professionals, so we have a number of architects and urban planners. We have very broad conversations about what we'd like to see in the neighborhood, and we look at specific lots or areas and look at certain lots and areas and come up with ideas of what would be best in that location with a neighborhood perspective.

And then in the workshops that we invite developers to, they have a specific project in mind. The way we've organized those workshops is we've had two different projects, and we break into two separate groups. The developers are in attendance. They have their team. They might have an architect or an urban designer. They might have a civil engineer. Then we have the neighbors, and then we have other design professionals who are not engaged on that particular project. We sit down, and we draw, we sketch, we make lists, we get creative, we think about broad ideas, we encourage developers to think outside their normal routine, to think a little bit outside the box.

EC: If that part about bringing developers to play gives you pause, join the club. I admit to feeling skeptical early on. But I liked Eric and his wife Alysha. They're smart and savvy, and Eric has been a board member of our community organization for years. Note: that's South Nashville Action People that Bill Perkins founded back in episode 1. Among other things, Eric is heading up the renovation of SNAP's five designated affordable housing apartments. It's been a long process of planning, budgeting, and securing a loan to make all five apartments rentable again. So he's not someone who doesn't have the interests of longtime or below median income residents in mind.

EM: It's common for neighbors to be distrustful of developers, and it's also common for developers to not hold neighbors' opinions in very high regard. And there are reasons for both of those things, and there are certainly situations that have happened in our neighborhood that led people to have that distrust or that caution about the other side.

Previous to doing these workshops, we'd seen a lot of interaction between developers and neighbors to be contentious. Developers would present ideas and neighbors would react to it. It was a passiveness on neighbors' part of being shown something, and the only option they had was to react, and often it was negative reactions. Even when there was some positive to the project, it was the negative that kind of took the forefront. We're hoping these workshops can kind of separate that reactionary response. We're hoping that by being proactive and developing good, strong relationships between all the parties involved that we can have a much stronger output of built product in the end.

I think sitting down at the table and working together, everybody can see that the other people involved are actually people. They're individuals. The developers are doing this as a job. The neighbors live here and this is their life. Everybody can share about their lives when they're sitting at the same table. They're at the same height. They're speaking the same language. And it's not somebody presenting to someone else.

The main thing about our neighborhood that attracted us when we first moved here and that I'm focused on retaining is the diversity of the neighborhood. Diversity makes a neighborhood so much more interesting, enjoyable, active. Part of the design workshops' goal is to make sure that the neighborhood remains diverse and that we don't become a much more homogenous neighborhood that's lacking in character, lacking in welcomeness. We want to make sure that everybody is welcome and have a very diverse, open neighborhood.

Alysha Irisari Malo: My name is Alysha Irisari Malo. I am the co-founder of Converge, which is a new arts organization in the neighborhood. We are a curated group of artists and creative thinkers that collaborate on interdisciplinary projects that have a positive social impact on the community.

The reason why we came up with Converge is because Eric and I are both seeking that in our personal lives. He's an independent architect. He was working at home he was going to coffee shops, but he felt like he needed interaction with other people. He was like, well you know, I want to this community work as well, and I feel like I'm divided in my personal work and my community work. I felt like it was isolating to be a professional artist having my studio at home.

I'd just started getting this interest with working with other people and sharing ideas with other people...Dialogue. All of those things worked their way into Converge.

EC: I think a lot of us stereotype artists as getting some kind of a calling very early on in life. It's true for some. But many artists struggle against the way they'll be perceived by family, whether they'll be able to live off of their work—and how they'll get by if they can't. And importantly, how they'll keep creating and growing as artists when success is measured by financial accomplishments and the kind of critical acclaim that is hard to come by.

Alysha's parents are both doctors. Her sister is a doctor. Her brother works for a major corporation. When she enrolled at Vanderbilt, she planned to be on the pre-med track. After some soul searching and long conversations with her family, she switched to visual art and art history. A couple years after graduating, she made for Chicago to continue her studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (You'll hear her refer to this as SAIC later.) The work she makes is multidisciplinary and hard to pinpoint—and that's not a bad thing.

AIM: I do poetry. I do recently text based visual art as well. I come from a painting and drawing background, that's kind of my comfort zone. But over years I've gone into abstract photography, mixed media, paintings and different materials on it, digital prints. I've done some etching of text on windshields for sculptural installations. I integrated one with a video.

AMELIA BRIGGS: My name is Amelia Briggs. I do not live in this neighborhood, but I work in this neighborhood. I'm director of David Lusk Gallery. I've lived in Nashville about a year. I'm also an artist myself, so I feel like I live in this neighborhood; even though I'm not technically here, I spend a lot of time in this neighborhood.

ERICA CICCARONE: Amelia's practice is one that embraces the kind of visual, ultra-sensory images we are inundated with since birth. Cartoons, comics, commercials, advertisements—all of it comes into her practice, and she harnesses it for playful, eye-popping compositions. My favorite are her inflatables: 3D wall hangings that look, quite deceptively, like inflated pool rafts. They also remind me of bubble-gum wrappers because she uses a palette of bright pastels to form rounded, abstract shapes that hint at coloring book drawings and cartoons. Undeniably feminine, they also playfully suggest the forms and materials of womanhood.

What's more is her curiosity about other artists—for years, she's been recording her conversations with them for print, about how they work, what they struggle with, how they think about color and form, and how they process the events of world. She hosts a podcast with a Memphis friend, Ellen Dempsey, in which they talk to artists about the creative process and more.

But Amelia's journey to this point wasn't a direct route. She sat down with Alysha to talk about how she got here, art in Memphis and in Nashville, and the commitment required to consistently make art for years.

AB: So I went through this period in time in my life where I turned a corner. I had graduated from undergrad and I think I mentioned earlier that I didn't care...I was a horrible student. I was bartending towards end of my time in college. I was getting a degree in painting so you'd think I would be really involved in that, but I was just kind of doing what I had to do to get by. I was

drinking a lot. I was hanging out with a lot of people that weren't going to pull me up or get me to where I wanted to be. I was working at a bar in downtown Indianapolis right by the Colts stadium and the convention center and making a ton of money. I was just going out all the time. I wasn't really working [on art]. I did graduate. I just lost myself.

I think a lot of artists experience this, or I did, where I felt like there was no hope for me to get a normal job. I had a BFA. I was seeing people in suits and going to nine to five jobs, and they seemed like real adults to me. I was working at a bar. I was slinging drinks, and I felt so desperate to make something of myself. I didn't want to be there forever. I ended up getting a job as a territory manager for a distributing company, basically working in sales, but it was still in the liquor industry. I was making good money. I was living in Indianapolis. Again, I started going out all the time and drinking all the time. I was really far away from anything art related. Kind of out of nowhere I started reading a lot, and I had this insane feeling of like that I had to try to do something, to be something. I felt like everything was meaningless. Going out with friends is great and getting drink...but at a certain point, it's just boring, and I just felt desperate. My parents came into town, and we were eating lunch at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. It was really crowded and busy. I remember I just told them I'm gonna quit my job, and I'm gonna move to Michigan. My parents were both really afraid for me but let me do it. I think they were afraid for me when I had gotten a BFA and they thought I would never have a real job. And then I had a real job, and I was making good money and supporting myself. But they let me do it. They have a little house in Michigan that they don't live in full time.

I saved up as much money as I could and just moved there and completely left my life. I kind of lost touch with my friends, and I didn't know anyone there. It was a really important thing that I did that I don't think I realized until later how much of an impact that made on my life and how much it drastically changed my life. I remember my parents have this little basement in the house. I just filled it with giant stretchers. It was a transformative experience because I was this really social person, and I had no one. It was really isolating and scary.

So I moved to Michigan. I had thrown myself into this situation, and I didn't really know what my plan was. I think I just felt like I had to give myself a chance as a visual artist. In my mind, that was the only way that I could really take a chance was to separate myself from Indianapolis from my friends, from everyone I knew...to have no job. I'd saved enough money so I didn't have to work. I basically felt like I had to walk away from everything to prove to myself or at least know that I had tried to give this a go. And I didn't know what that meant. I remember feeling an odd sense of just knowing that it was the right thing to do. But I also experienced so much doubt when I was there from being isolated. I remember being alone so much that even going to the grocery store felt really overwhelming to be around people 'cause I was walking around in paint-covered sweats. I was a crazy person. I went from being really social person to just no one. I lost a lot of friends because I didn't reach out to anyone. I didn't know what to say.

AIM: How did that inform your art?

AB: Well, I got there and put all this pressure on myself, and it paralyzed me. In my mind, I thought I have to make a masterpiece now because I've made all these sacrifices. I started from scratch and I tried to just break it down into what am I interested in painting? What do I want to

paint? What do I enjoy painting? I was looking at a lot of painters, and I had to force myself to not look at other work because I would mimic things without realizing it. My parents have a ton of *Time* magazines and *New Yorker* magazines and *Smithsonian* magazines. I started tearing out images from those magazines, and then I started drawing them on canvas. I ended up painting a lot of pictures of women, and I started thinking about how women are portrayed in the media and fashion magazines. I started painting pictures of women trying to get to sense of urgency or this sense of struggle or desperation in any of them. It just started transferring onto the canvas. I painted women who were mothers, women with other women. I started thinking about jealousy. I started thinking about a woman's struggles to overcome what people expect of her, or a woman potentially losing her identity through being a mother or being married. I started thinking about all those things, which is odd because I'm not a mother, and I wasn't married or even in a seriously relationship at the time. But for some reason I was really fascinated with that concept.

AIM: Through search of your own identity?

AB: Yeah, yeah. I gravitated to this one photograph that I found of my mother on wedding day. My mother had to drop out of grad school because she found out she was pregnant with me. She had only been with my dad for six months. Of course she went back and ended up getting her PhD. But there's this photograph on her wedding day, and she just looks so sad. My mother is an incredibly driven woman, and I admire that in her. I think she was so afraid of becoming like anyone else that she grew up with who didn't go to school. She worked really hard and was in a master's program, and she found out she was pregnant. She had to drop out, and she got married. Maybe it was me imagining it, but I imagined what would go through your mind when you don't come from a background of people who go to college, and it's a big deal for you to go to be there, and then you have to walk away from it. She was obviously determined to back, and she did, but I was obsessed with that idea of losing yourself. I think that I very obviously relates to how I felt working in that job and going out all the time and drinking. I had lost myself, not to be cheesy. I was painting all these images of women. Over time—to get back to why this brought me to Memphis—I realized I needed to make a body of work to apply to graduate school. That was the most obvious end to what I was doing 'cause I wasn't going to be in Michigan forever. I was going to run out of money, and I had to go back and get a job.

AIM: Had you thought about taking the artist's path and trying to start getting in shows and exhibiting—and not doing school?

AB: I tried to get into some shows, and I think that my work was really bad. I wasn't that strong. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was young. It was hesitant. Even though I was doing something good for my work and I was finding my voice as an artist, I wasn't there yet. I tried to get into some shows. I was rejected by shows. I got into a few shows, but for some reason it didn't occur to me to be like, "I'm going to give this a go." It felt like the only way to reinsert myself in another art community or to find those connections that would lead me to the next step was graduate school. I also fantasized about moving to Colorado or moving somewhere, but I ultimately knew that would be isolating and really hard for me to enter into some kind of art community. I put together a body of work and applied to several graduate programs. My mom convinced me to apply to university of Memphis. I didn't want to apply there.

AIM: How did she hear about the University of Memphis?

AB: She just did research of not expensive MFA programs that wouldn't put me in an enormous amount of debt. She brought that one to my attention, and I didn't want to apply. I was accepted but I didn't really want to go visit. She was like, "Just go visit with me." We went, and I knew immediately that's where I needed to be.

AIM: Just belonging.

AB: Yeah. I just felt a sense of, "I'm going to try this." I started interning at David Lusk Gallery while I was in grad school, which is how I have the job that I do now.

Do you feel like you went through anything similar where you had to make a choice to commit to your work or not?

AIM: So I definitely felt like when I was at Vanderbilt and I decided to major in art and art history and not go into the sciences, that was a big deal. I heard a lot about that. I had been this really dedicated person at Vanderbilt. Then I went to SAIC, and everyone was at this high caliber. They were all competing to be rock star artists. That first semester I thought to myself, "Am I doing the right thing?" And the other time when I became a mother.

I love, love my son. But at the time I was just getting starting to get interest in doing shows here. I started going out and was getting involved with getting my work out to galleries and exhibit. I was starting to get a record stuff going on in Nashville again. I was engaging with people, going to openings...And then I got pregnant and I felt like it just stopped. There was a two year hiatus where I didn't know if I was coming back to art or not. It was kind of depressing. It was like a whole identity change becoming a mother. I was very driven to do something professionally, be the best that I could be... and then having this abrupt stop to that and moving into this, "You're a mother now. You breastfeed and you change diapers. It's not about you. It's about the child. I'm not making any art work. I can't say I'm an artist."

I was extremely hard on myself. I was just stuck in this funk for at least a year. It took me a year to come out of it...probably two years I felt like, I knew what I was doing was probably important, but it was hard to get that affirmation from other people. I didn't know many other people with children. I felt like it was isolating. I was at home, which was a total change. I didn't have experience with kids.

AB: What did you try to force yourself to do to get back into it?

AIM: I started writing some because I didn't have time to get into the studio and actually have studio time. I felt disconnected even from sketching. Eric encouraged me to start taking photography when we were out on walks in the neighborhood and I was pushing Grayson around in a stroller. He was like, "Take your camera with you. Just fool around." I'm like, "I'm not a photographer. I'm not really trained. I had classes in college, but that was a while ago." And he was like, "No. Just do it." I started looking at things. Like there's glass on the ground. Well that's interesting. I started taking photos of these little things in our gritty neighborhood. Leftover string or trash, candy that was crumbling with ants all over it. A beaten-up run-over newspaper.

Just things that people pass by and don't really think about. I saw an opportunity for re-focusing on those things and making them dramatic. That's how I slowly got back into art. I had this huge self-consciousness bearing down on me about photography. "I don't know about f-stops. I'm not technical. I'm not printing this on really great paper. I don't know all of that different tools to use. But I got over it. A lot of that is due to Eric encouraging me. He was like, "These are really interesting. It doesn't matter. You're a photographer because you took these photos." And I'm like, "But I'm not—" "No, no. You're a photographer because you took these photos." I started finding ways to merge the writing and the photography together and that's how I started coming up with some of the newer body of work.

AB: I think it's crazy how far away you can feel from your work when you take some time off, and how hard it can be to feel connected with it again or feel like what you're doing makes sense. I think it's so important to prepare for that when people are coming out of school, or when people are just trying to keep making work.

AIM: They don't tell you about this during art school! I did have one professor at the School of the Art Institute who was like, "Do something creative every day. Just continue the fluidity of the creative process in your head. Sketch something every day, or do something little. Do a collage with Post-It notes." That is one of the most difficult things to do! I didn't realize it would be so difficult to live in the real world. It's such a blessing to have that dedicated time while you're in school. You'll never really be able to get to have that time again outside of school, or at least for very few people.

AB: It's not just the time, it's the audience. If you come out of a school—anyone who's an artist—if you don't have a gallery, if you don't have people around you who are holding you accountable for what you're doing, that's one of the hardest things to overcome. How do you find meaning in making work if no one is looking? Or if no one will look? Or if it will just pile up in your basement and no one may ever see it. Everybody in a creative position has to dig deep about "Why am I doing this?" It's so easy for it to feel meaningless. That's the hardest thing, having that community or a way to find audience or feel like there's meaning behind what you're doing.

You kind of have to go through a stage and where you swallow your ego. Someone who is driven to go to law school or med school, there's an easy way to spell out someone's success. Oh, that person is a lawyer, I respect them. That person has worked really hard to be a doctor.

AIM: That was ingrained in me very heavily as a child.

AB: Oh I'm sure. My mom came from a family where no one had gone to college, and she pulled herself out of that to get a PhD and has her own practice. She's a very strong, hard working woman. That's something I had to grapple with. Like a lot of artists, you can feel bad for yourself. You have people who are being celebrated, especially having siblings that are really successful, and it's easy to see they're successful. It's not easy to see how someone is successful if they're an artist. I remember feeling desperate to be acknowledged as someone who is driven and dedicated to something, but you don't always have something to show for it. That can be

really hard to swallow that ego and just accept the fact that people might not view you in that way necessarily.

AIM: And at the same point, if I had followed my original plan and become a doctor or gone into medicine of some sort, I would not be happy. I'm just starting to realize that I'm an intelligent person and an artist; I don't have to measure myself by the regular standards.

I'm curious how you feel as a new artist coming into Nashville within the past year, what that experience has been for you, and how Nashville compares with other cities regionally and nationally, and how you feel Wedgewood-Houston might fit in with that picture.

AB: I actually don't feel like I have a lot of experience in other cities. I lived in Indianapolis for a very long time, but I wasn't very involved in the art scene. Even though I was in BFA program at Indiana University, I was very distracted at the time and didn't go to openings much. I was just a different person. I feel like the only other art scene I can comment on is Memphis because I was in a graduate program there and I got to know a lot of artists. There's a lot of very passionate people that are trying very hard to get the art scene on the map there. There's also a lot lacking. They need more art writing. There's not any critical writing about art. I think that would help. I am so glad I moved to Memphis and had that experience having never really lived in the South before that. I think it's a great place for a young artist, or an artist at all, to move. There's just a lot of excitement and hardworking people down there.

AIM: What are your impressions of Wedgewood-Houston from the past year you've been here?

AB: I've been surprised. I was kind of afraid to move to Nashville. I didn't want to move to Nashville. We moved here because of my fiance's job. It worked out that I was able to keep my job that I was working at in Memphis. I hadn't spent a lot of time in Nashville. There's a weird rivalry between Memphis and Nashville. I think I just had it in my mind that Nashville was gonna be more commercial and not have the grit of Memphis. I was really worried. I was also worried because when I was in Memphis I was in graduate school and had created this community of artists. I was scared to be plucked from that even though Nashville's not that far away. I didn't know how I was going to be received. I was fortunate enough to come into an art job that allowed me to be introduced to people in the arts, which helped me a great deal. Without that I would have felt incredibly isolated. Because how do you meet other artists?

AIM: Even a couple hours is a lot when you're talking about everyday living and your everyday environment. One thing that is interesting is that there are so many people moving here. I used to feel like I knew the majority of the art community. I've realized that within the past couple of years, the art community has just multiplied. I think there are also some challenges with our neighborhood being opened to the public. Historically the public didn't really come to our neighborhood. It was maker- and artist studio, industrial, and then this diverse neighborhood that nestled inside of this pocket community. We are trying to think about how things have changed and how to still connect with people in the community who have been here or grown up here and have experienced the community in very different way. Do you have any thoughts about the gallery's role of being in the community as a business and ways to engage the community? Has that come across your radar?

AB: That's something that I certainly think about. Wedgewood-Houston is becoming known as this arts district, and I don't know how welcoming that is to people who live here. To be honest, I haven't had many conversations with people who have lived here for a long time. I certainly hope that people feel welcome. We try to do a lot of talks at gallery that are open to the public informing people about the work that we have on walls, and giving artists opportunity to talk. And this is something I've talked to Erica about and other people about. I get to a point where I'm just not sure how to further engage. We advertise with NPR, which helps let people know where we are. I do feel like there's this great turnout for art crawl, which is really exciting to see that many people are coming out. But I don't know how many of those people physically live in neighborhood, or if people feel like it's for them and if they can come over and engage with us.

AIM: I don't know if possibly doing a community day or something where people could come and meet, greet each other, have a get together but with the art around them, or maybe having some art appreciation programming for residents that maybe feel intimidated by art.

AB: They have record day in Nashville where people go out and buy records and support the record store. We want to do something similar to that with with galleries where it's a gallery day, or maybe it's structured around a community day. That is something we've talked about a lot.

AIM: I didn't realize it before, but over the past couple of years, I do really feel like community is the core of my practice. I used to always think that I was very individualistic. But I think that either I've changed, or I've just realized that was just one aspect of me. I really do need this community to thrive.

EC: A big thanks for Alysha Irisari Malo, Eric Malo, Amelia Briggs, and all of the South Nashville voices on today's episode.

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We record our interviews at Nashville Public Television. Please check out their awesome video series, A Word on Words, where authors talk to authors about all topics literary. Find it at awordonwords.org. BURNAWAY is an awesome contemporary art magazine, and they're helping us spread the word about South Nashville. Read their reviews, news, and interviews at burnaway.org.

Finally, Lauren Cierzan illustrates every episode of WeHome. You can view them online at our website wehomepodcast.org and learn more about Amelia, Alysha and our team.

Next time, we'll talk to two high school students who have a new plan for South Nashville: solar sidewalks.

Thanks for listening. I'm Erica Ciccarone, recording from Wedgewood-Houston in Nashville, Tennessee.

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