

INITIATIVE

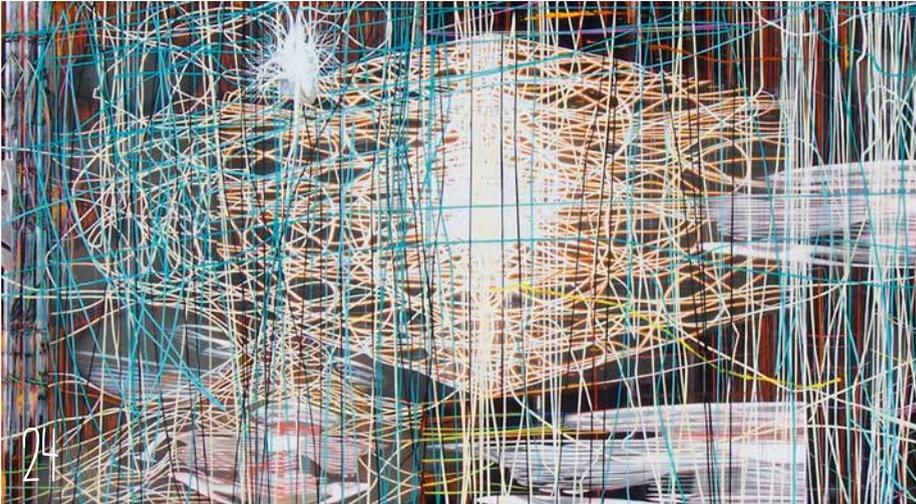
SEPTEMBER 2015

FIELD



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The Buzz Around Town

THE MUSIC CITY CENTER HAS ADDED HALF
A MILLION HONEY BEES DOWNTOWN, AND
THAT'S SWEET NEWS FOR MUCH GREATER
REASONS THAN HONEY

BY BENJAMIN HURSTON | PHOTOS BY ROBBY KLEIN

The beekeeper doesn't exactly make the best first impression.

In an effort to beat the heat and catch “the girls” at a time when they aren't likely to be too aggressive, he's scheduled our interview for 6:30 a.m., but it's closer to 7:15 when his booming baritone finally announces his arrival.

“Sorry I'm so late,” Jamie Meredith calls as he hurries down the huge concrete hallway that runs through the back of house at the Music City Center. “We had an incident on the farm this morning.”

The holdup: a fox got into the henhouse on the five-acre farm where he, his wife, and their two kids live out in Neely's Bend. Luckily, the fox got stuck just out of reach of the chickens, and none were hurt. Still, Jamie had to figure out a way to get the fox out without putting himself or his birds at risk, an effort that took up much of his morning.

It's an almost comically cliché tale, yet it's delivered in such a steady and sober fashion, it's clear that situations of the sort are not too out of the ordinary for Jamie.

Jamie is a stocky forty-one-year-old farmer and family man with freckles and spiky strawberry blonde hair. On top of his day job as director of operations at Plan Left, an East Nashville advertising and marketing firm, he also manages half a dozen honey bee hives in the Nashville area, including four



A wide-angle photograph of a vast field of green sedum plants, likely in a prairie or meadow. The plants are densely packed and stretch towards the horizon. The sky is a mix of soft blues and greys, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The lighting is diffused, creating a calm and natural atmosphere.

will produce about 360 pounds of honey for the center every year, beginning next spring. Around half of that will be jarred and distributed for promotional use. The other half will go straight to the kitchen, where Chef Max Knoepfel and his culinary team will use it to sweeten the food they serve to the center's guests.

"He really wanted a garden," Marketing and PR Manager Mary Brette Clippard says of the Swiss chef. "But the sedums weren't conducive to gardening, so we got bees instead."

"He was like, 'If I can't grow it, then by golly, I'm going to pollinate it,'" Jamie chimes in. "You can tell that his heart is very much in what we are doing."

But if we are talking hearts, it's hard to find someone more devoted to the cause than Jamie himself.

Originally from Wichita, Kansas, Jamie already had a deep love for nature and animals when a friend's father approached him about taking a few of his hives four years ago. He says he was pretty freaked out when he first started, but he soon realized that bees aren't that different from other animals, including humans.

"They are in many ways the greatest example of what we as humans strive to become," he says. "They express an ideal that we all strive for in our day-to-day lives: working, coexisting, and protecting their freedom to do so."

Warning: a quick Google search into the complexity of bee hives might result in half an hour of intensely reading bee trivia you never thought you'd find interesting. As Jamie has discovered through his interactions with the insects, they live in incredibly efficient societies, with each bee essentially devoted to the good of the hive instead of their own survival. This extreme utilitarianism is perfectly exemplified by the fact that the female worker bees will literally work themselves to death, flying around collecting nectar to bring back to the hive until their wings fall off and they starve to death.

"You hear people talk about the God Particle. Well, bees, to me, are the God insect," Jamie says. "They embody all that we should be."

And it's true that bees are extremely devout and self-sacrificing, but strict devotion to the health and social order of the hive also requires some less-than-altruistic activity. For example, when rival queens are present in the hive, bees will resort to stinging these competitors to death or even drowning them in honey.

Still, the fact remains that honey bees can be ruthless when the safety of their social order is threatened. Though they rarely sting when they are out gathering nectar—the time when it's most common for the average person to encounter them—they are much more protective when they perceive a threat to the hive.

"They are like everything else in nature: they have a rhythm and a cadence," Jamie says with an experienced understanding that is overlooked by so many who would rather see bees as pests than actually try to understand their complexity and their important link to our own survival. "If you approach them on their terms, you can coexist with them in harmony."

But that's just the problem, isn't it? Our individualistic, profit-driven

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP THE BEES?

1. **BUY LOCAL HONEY!**
2. **Plant flowers that bees love—everywhere.**
3. **Leave yards and fields uncut where you can.**
4. **Don't use chemicals** (instead use natural things like neem oil, traps, and co-planted flowers to drive away insects).
5. **Volunteer to help a local beekeeper.**





society has rendered much of the human population unwilling to approach other lifeforms on this planet on any terms other than their own personal ones. As big-business agriculture continues to use pesticides and herbicides in mass quantities on crops; as our governments drag their feet to put stricter limits on harmful emissions; and as everyday residents continue to spray poisons to kill bees, wasps, and other natural pollinators, there seems to be a disconnect. There's an utter lack of willingness by human beings to address our dependence on nature.

"If we do continue to see the decline in natural bee populations, and we continue to see farmers having trouble pollinating their crops and food prices start doubling, tripling, and eventually quadrupling, then I think we'll see the potential for people to really have an impact," Jamie says hopefully. "When it becomes a necessity. Right now, it's just an afterthought."

It's a more positive outlook than many scientists and environmentally conscious people will grant of their own kind. They believe by the time that realization happens, it may be too late. But then again, Jamie is an eternal optimist. He tells me that even if bee populations continue to decline, we may see that nature creates another method of pollinating, citing a recent rise in wasp populations as a possible example. Wasps, though capable, are not as efficient at transferring pollen between plants as the much fuzzier honey bee. They are also more aggressive. But Jamie doesn't point that out. He's determined to stay positive.

Perhaps I caught him on a good day. Perhaps it's just his nature. Or perhaps his continued optimism is a direct result of the fulfillment and satisfaction he gets from working so hard to keep up the health of his own colony, the human hive.

"I am calmed by them," he says of the bees. "I find a lot of peace in knowing that I am helping care for something that is vital to our existence on this great planet." 



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