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TRAVEL

Nashville is no one-note town

Country is king, but there's more to this city than a night at the Opry

April 25, 2010

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — If you're in a hurry, Nashville's not for you.

The Capital of Country Music, home of the Grand Ole Opry, deserves a leisurely tempo, played tunefully and with friends.

» Click to enlarge image



Kent Blazy, award-winning song writer, wows the crowd at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville, Tenn.

(Photo by Steve Haggerty)

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There's no shortage of things to do along Nashville's Honky Tonk Row.

(Photo by Steve Haggerty)

IF YOU GO

STAYING THERE: Surround yourself with tropical gardens and fountains at the Gaylord Opryland Resort near the Opry House. Double rooms start at \$149. Beautiful furnishings, spa, swimming pools and gym, top-rated restaurants, free shuttle service and free parking; (888) 777-6779, gaylordhotels.com.

EATING THERE: Jack's Bar-B-Que serves ribs, roasts, burgers and chicken buffet-style at 416 Broadway (off Ryman Alley); (615) 254-5715. Monell's, 1235 6th Ave. North, offers old-fashioned Southern

Sit down with a guitar on any bench in this town, strum a few chords and before you can say, "Nashville Cats," six strangers will gather around and offer to harmonize.

Then there's the other Nashville, the town that created the billion-dollar Country and Western industry. Some 400 of these artists will come together here June 10-13 for 70 hours of unforgettable music at this year's CMA Music Festival (cmafest.com).

Many of those top-ranked artists, musicians, promoters and producers will rake in millions this year thanks to tours, concerts, festivals, recordings and TV appearances. And when money rules, the prevailing zeitgeist is usually cut-throat. But not in Nashville.

"They call it Music City because of the Opry, and the Opry supports the town, at least indirectly," said bass guitarist John Cowan, whose latest CD, "The Massenburg Sessions," was released this month. We caught up with Cowan, a Nashville resident, between sets at the Station Inn, where he put down his electric bass just long enough to talk about Nashville's rebirth.

"But there's more than country music today," he said. "Nashville draws musicians from all musical genres: rock stars, jazz players, heavy metal and classical musicians have moved here to live and work. That's partly because it's affordable. But the allure is the camaraderie and mutual respect musicians feel when they happen to meet. It's a kind of connectedness, even if they'll never work together."

That sense of connection was palpable during the five days we toured Music City, visiting most of the

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cooking at family-style tables in Nashville's Germantown area. This casual, friendly spot with moderate prices is a family favorite; (615) 248-4747.

NIGHT SPOTS: The Bluebird Cafe, 4104 Hillsboro Pike, is open every night. Reservations can be made online at bluebirdcafe.com for Tuesday-Saturday shows. The Station Inn, 402 12th Ave. South, also is open nightly; (615) 255-3307, stationinn.com.

HIT THE BOARDS: Do the Texas two-step at the Wildhorse Saloon. Big, noisy, crowded, casual and upbeat. At 120 2nd Ave. North; (615) 902-8200.

SIGHTSEEING: Ryman Auditorium, 116 5th Ave., has daily tours from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. For events and concert schedules, visit ryman.com or call (615) 889-3060.

The Grand Ole Opry at Broadway and 3rd Avenue offers backstage tours daily. Grand Ole Opry shows on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. The Opry Country Classics show lights up on Thursday evenings; (615) 871-OPRY, opry.com.

The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 222 5th Ave. South, features memorabilia plus video and audio clips of performers; (800) 852-6437, countrymusichalloffame.com. RCA Studio B tours are booked through the Country Music Hall of Fame; countrymusichalloffame.com.

usual tourist attractions and sampling local venues dedicated to showcasing artists and new songs.

"Integrity," said spokesman Dan Rogers, in the Grand Ole Opry's back office, explaining why he has the world's best job. "That's what makes Nashville unique. It doesn't matter who you are, where you've played or how much you've earned. It's not about selling tickets. It's about the music and the people who play it."

The C&W celebs who catch their first big break on the Grand Ole Opry stage may go on to bigger contracts, he said. But when they come back to Nashville, they remember their roots, or at least their manners. The Grammy winner in the Stetson who brushes past you in the airport could be the same Opry singer who shakes hands and thanks you for coming.

"Acknowledging fan attention and dedication is part of the culture at the Opry," Rogers said. "I've seen cast members stand and sign autographs until the last person who wants one has gone and there's no one left in line."

The Grand Ole Opry is, of course, the main event. Don't even think of coming and not buying tickets for a Friday or Saturday night show in the Opry's 4,000-seat house. I could hardly wait for the show to start. But I left the theater with mixed feelings — happy

for the experience but buried by the avalanche of advertising.

"The Opry always sponsored flour commercials," the woman next to me said. Yes, indeed. But radio ads are easier to tune out. It's a different dynamic in the Opry House, where outsized projection screens, illuminated with product names and logos, crowd the stage. Equally intrusive was the announcer's constant drone, broadcast over the radio but heard by all of us, unnecessarily, I thought. Minute for minute, there was more speechifying than music.

A much better place to hear Nashville's singer/songwriters is the Bluebird Cafe, a legendary lounge tucked away in a bare, low-ceilinged space. The musicians formed a circle in the center of the room under the spotlights, with the audience sitting on all sides in semi-darkness. Assigned to the last two chairs, we found ourselves a foot from singer-songwriter Cory Batten, playing that night with Kent Blazy and Karyn Rochelle.

Batten politely moved his beer so I wouldn't kick it over, and I moved my purse away from his elbow. We exchanged names, smiles and a few sentences. If people were only that nice all the time. It was the sort of moment I'll always associate with Nashville.

The next night we spent at the Station Inn, another casual joint. John Cowan and his band played two sets for a cheering crowd, who clapped, drank beer and ate burgers and chicken.

We spent a morning "honky-tonking," on Honky Tonk Row, four blocks on Lower Broadway, listening to the ear-splitting bands that play from about 10 a.m. until after midnight. Willie Nelson and Garth Brooks — so we were told — started out in one of these crowded storefronts, lined along the street between CD and record stores, poster and T-shirt shops, cafes and barbecue joints. It's good manners to stuff a dollar into the hat (two if you like what you hear).

Rogers recommended Jack's Bar-B-Que for lunch. We ordered the famous hickory-smoked ribs with the trimmings. The buffet counter line runs out the front door but it moves fast, and within 15 minutes you'll be digging in. Jack Cawthon himself, rarely seen without his cowboy hat, patrols the tables, dutifully smiling for the cameras and offering to bring sweet tea refills.

Close by is the Ryman Auditorium. Once a church, it was the Grand Ole Opry's best-known home from 1943-1974, and to some fans, the only real home. Without air conditioning or spacious backstage rooms, the Ryman challenged performers and fans alike. Our tour guide said that at one time, audiences brought box lunches from home and picnicked throughout the performance. Daily tours run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Keep an eye out for the historic photos and posters in the dressing rooms.

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I almost saw Elvis, and certainly felt his presence, at RCA Studio B, in a nondescript cement-block building. If it weren't for the refrigerator-size orange guitar on the corner, you'd never guess that this studio recorded 55,000 songs sung by artists like Chet Atkins and Roy Orbison between 1957 and 1977. The Steinway grand piano Presley loved to play is still in use.

"Elvis and his backup singers, the Jordanaires, recorded 262 hit songs here, always in the dark," said Keith Wright, the Elvis acolyte who led our group of 15 through the building. "They'd come in at 4:30 a.m, usually on Sunday."

Most visitors go to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum first; we went last, expecting a dry collection of historic guitars and sequined jackets. But the exhibits displayed dozens of music clips and interpretive material arranged by decade, along with remastered films that said as much about the singers as about their songs. It's a folklore museum extraordinaire, and one with a single focus.

"It's not just the music but the words that matter," said Liz Thiels, a spokeswoman for the collection. "The songs are important because of the stories they tell about ordinary people and their concerns, about war, hard times and about our culture."

They tell us who we are, and that matters.

Anne Z. Cooke is a California-based free-lance writer.

Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored in part by the Gaylord Opryland Hotel.

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