

TRAVEL

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TENNESSEE

Nashville's getting back in the groove

■ Music City has made a remarkable comeback since last May's deluge — and the Grand Ole Opry didn't miss a beat.

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Miami Herald

NASHVILLE — When clouds gathered over Nashville and the rain began to fall, the expected spring shower became a torrent, and the torrent became a killer. Before it was over, the Cumberland River had risen to a near-record height of 56.86 feet, overflowing its banks, washing out fields and neighborhoods and flooding much of Music City's historic downtown.

For a large town, Nashville is an unexpectedly friendly place. We had visited the previous autumn and, encountering smiles on every hand, instantly felt welcome. We bought tickets for a performance at the Grand Ole Opry and joined hordes of other tourists for a stroll along Broadway, stopping in at two or three of the noisy honky tonk music bars where hopeful singers get their start. The Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum's exhibits proved intriguing, and so did the barbecue and biscuits, a café staple.

We even climbed aboard the General Jackson Showboat paddle-wheeler for lunch and a fall color cruise on the usually placid Cumberland River, which meanders through Nashville. In the autumn, Tennessee's maple trees, growing along the river banks and in front yards, glow every possible shade of red and yellow.

Now, watching the disaster broadcast this year on television as it happened, on May 1 and 2 — desperate scenes of rescues, cars floating on residential streets, water to the rooftops — we wondered when and if the Capital of Country Music would climb back on its feet. Silty, smelly water crept into basements, shut down the city's power grid, ruined the tropical arboretum at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel, and flooded the Grand Ole Opry and the Symphony Center.

As New Orleans has shown, rebuilding a flooded city can take months or years. But when Nashvillians say "the show must go on," they mean it, literally. The streets were barely dry when an army of city agencies and volunteers — community groups, musicians, celebrities and emergency response teams — stepped up to help, giving money,



GRAND OLE OPRY

BACK TO BUSINESS: Grand Ole Opry members Brad Paisley and Jimmy Dickens unveil the famed circle of wood at the Grand Ole Opry House shortly before returning it to center stage last month.

partnering with civic groups and organizing fundraisers.

"Absolutely, Nashville bounced back with energy and optimism," said Heather Middleton with the Nashville Convention & Visitors Bureau. "By the beginning of June, downtown Nashville was completely up and running, with the exception of the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, which is due to reopen in January 2011."

At the Grand Ole Opry, the staff and supporters scrambled to stay on schedule, according to Opry Spokesman Dan Rogers.

"We didn't miss a single performance," he said. "We moved to the War Memorial Auditorium first, and then to the Ryman Auditorium (both venues escaped damage) . . . And it wasn't just the seats or carpets that were ruined. The water rose 46 inches above the stage. But the reconstruction began almost immediately. We'll be back by the end of September."

If the Grand Ole Opry was Nashville's only music connection, the city might have been in trouble. But the town that made Minnie Pearl a national figure now supports a much broader artistic base.

"They call it Music City because of the Opry, and the Opry supports the town, at least indirectly," said bass guitarist John Cowan, a Nashville resident on tour with the Doo-bie Brothers. We caught up with him between sets at the Station Inn, where he put down "Whitey," his 1962 Fender Jazz bass guitar, just long enough to muse on the Nashville ethos.

"Nashville draws musicians from all musical genres," he told us. "Rock stars, jazz players, heavy

metal and classical musicians have moved here to live and work, partly because it's affordable. But the allure is the camaraderie and mutual respect musicians feel when they happen to meet. It's a special connectedness, even if they'll never work together."

That sense of connection was palpable during our five days in Music City, touring in the daytime and listening to music at night. The Nashville we saw has something special.

"Integrity," said Rogers, at the Opry. "That's what it is. And 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 performers who catch that first big break on the Opry stage may go on to bigger contracts. "But when they come back to Nashville, they remember their roots," he said. "Acknowledging fan attention and dedication is part of the culture. 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."

And the Opry is still the main event. Don't even think of coming and missing a show in the Opry's 4,000-seat house, due to reopen on Friday. It's an event, a performance, a crowd-pleaser and a national habit.

For an intimate venue dedicated to showcasing established and future singer/songwriters, spend an evening at the legendary Bluebird Café, a lounge tucked away in a bare, low-ceilinged space. The players sit in the center under the lights; the audience sits at

small tables in semi-darkness. We got the last two seats and found ourselves crowded next to singer-songwriter Cory Batten, playing that night with Kent Blazy and Karyn Rochelle.

As the set began, Batten moved his beer under his chair so I wouldn't kick it over, I shifted my purse away from his elbow, and we exchanged names and smiles. If that's what Nashville's all about, I'd like the recipe.

At the Station Inn, another casual joint, we ordered beer and chicken, along with a cheering, clapping crowd on hand to hear John Cowan and his band. Cowan earns a living making music. He records albums, tours nationally and internationally and plays when he comes back home to Nashville. Look for him at the Station Inn or the Grand Ole Opry.

From now through September, the Opry performs at the Ryman Auditorium, its home from 1943-1974. The Ryman, built as a church, with long curved pews and no air conditioning or real dressing rooms, challenged performers and fans alike. Our tour guide said that in the show's early days, when restaurants were few and the Opry was "the people's theater," attendees packed picnic lunches and ate during the show. If you can catch the Opry soon, you, too, can bring a picnic lunch.

I thought I saw Elvis, or maybe I just felt his presence, on our visit to RCA Studio B, where Elvis — and Chet Atkins, Roy Orbison and many others — recorded from 1957 to 1977. If you see a refrigerator-sized, orange guitar sticking up in front of a one-story cinder-block building, you're there. Elvis'

Going to Nashville

● **Getting there:** It's a two-hour flight from South Florida to Nashville, with round-trip airfare from Miami starting at \$376 and \$298 from Fort Lauderdale. American Airlines provides nonstop service from Miami, Southwest from Fort Lauderdale.

● **Information:** Nashville Convention & Visitors Bureau, 615-259-4730; www.visitmusiccity.com.

LODGING

● We stayed at the **Gaylord Opryland Resort**, closed by the flood and not scheduled to reopen until Nov. 15. Double rooms average from \$189 to \$256. Expect beautiful furnishings, full-service concierge, a half-dozen new restaurants, spa and treatment rooms, swimming pools and gym, lush gardens and waterfalls and free shuttle service. 866-972-6779; www.gaylordhotels.com.

● The new **Hutton Hotel** is elegantly beautiful and within walking distance of Vanderbilt University. 1808 West End Ave.; 615-340-9333; www.huttonhotel.com. Rooms from \$219 plus tax.

WHERE TO EAT

● **Lunch on Broadway:** Try real southern food at Jack's Bar-B-Cue, cooked from scratch, served buffet-style and eaten at tables on two floors. Headliners are ribs, roasts, burgers, chicken, salads, cold slaw and sweet tea. 416 Broadway (off Ryman Alley), 615-254-5715; www.jacksbarbecue.com. Entrees \$4-\$21.99.

● The elegant **Acorn** offers a contemporary take on Southern ingredients. More than one reviewer has recommended the chorizo and potato-crusted halibut with Jack Daniel's pecan cream sauce. 114 28th Ave.; 615-320-4399; www.theacornrestaurant.com. Entrees \$18-\$32.

● **Loveless Café:** Long waits but killer biscuits and country charm in this Nashville institution. 8400 Highway 100; 615-646-9700; www.lovelesscafe.com. Dinner entrees \$9.95-\$16.95.

WHAT TO DO

● **The Ryman Auditorium:** Daily tours. 116 Fifth Ave. N., 615-889-3060; www.ryman.com. Adults: \$13. Children 4-11: \$6.50.

● **The Grand Ole Opry:** Reopening Sept. 28, with daily backstage tours. Grand Ole Opry shows on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. "The Opry Country Classics" show lights up Thursday evenings. At Broadway and Third Avenue, 800-733-6779; www.opry.com. Tours cost \$17.50 for adults and \$12.50 for children.

● **Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum:** History, memorabilia and film-and-audio clips. 222 Fifth Ave. S., 615-416-2001; www.countrymusichalloffame.com. Admission is \$19.99 and \$11.95 for youth tickets.

● **RCA Studio B:** Book tours through the Country Music Hall of Fame, www.countrymusichalloffame.com.

● **Hitting the boards:** Do the Texas Two Step at the Wild-horse Saloon. Big, noisy, crowded, casual and upbeat, this place is owned by the Gaylord Hotel chain. 120 Second Ave. N., 615-902-8200. Visit www.wildhorsesaloon.com. Free admission until 6 p.m.

● **The Bluebird Café:** Open every night. Visit www.bluebirdcafe.com to make reservations for Tuesday-Saturday shows. 4104 Hillsboro Pike, 615-383-1461. Entrees \$8.50-\$16.95.

● **The Station Inn:** Open every night. 402 12th Ave. S., 615-255-3307; www.stationinn.com.

Steinway grand piano is in its familiar corner, and still in use.

"Elvis recorded 262 hit songs with the Jordanaires on that piano," said Keith Wright, the Elvis acolyte who led our tour (no drop-ins please; tours must be booked in advance.) "They'd come in at 4:30 a.m. on Sunday and record in the dark."

Most visitors tour the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum first; we went last, expecting cases of dusty sequined jackets and well-thumbed album covers. Instead we found famous guitars, posters,

music clips from the first days of film, interpretive exhibits and remastered films that said as much about the singers as their songs. The place is a veritable folklore museum.

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

I knew what she meant. They tell us who we are, and that always matters.