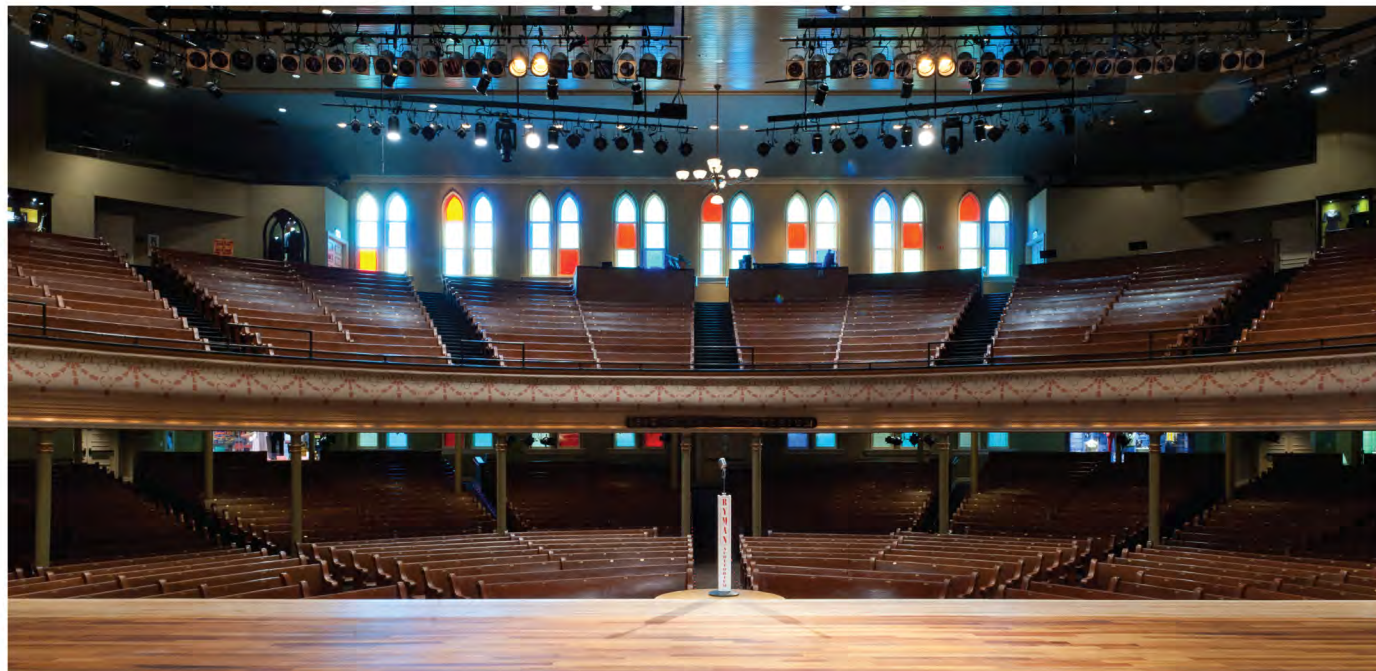


The Magic of Nashville

Upscale dining, boutique hotels and a strong sense of history make Music City a must.

STORY BY WENDY MALLOY



View from the stage of the Ryman Auditorium, a former tabernacle that housed the Grand Ole Opry till 1974 and continues to shine with acts of every genre.



Fried chicken and all the fixin's at Woolworth on 5th, a beautifully restored five-and-dime where Civil Rights history unfolded.



A giant chandelier made of car parts (right) hangs above a staircase at the cowboy-chic Bobby Hotel. Credit: Lisa Diederich Photography.

It's the music, of course, that's always made Nashville magic. Johnny, Dolly, Waylon and Patsy. Reba. Hank. Loretta. The list of legends is endless, and the mecca that draws their fans and wannabes just as infinite in the gifts it grants. From the glittery crush of Broadway's honkytonks to the hallowed Ryman and the upstart indie clubs, music is everywhere.

And now, so are the cranes—the most visible symbol of the renaissance reshaping Music City, USA. New towers are taking their places in the Nashville skyline, pushing higher and higher as more people flood into town—almost 100 every day. Some undoubtedly head straight to the Grand Ole Opry, guitar in hand, others beeline to tech gigs in thriving East Nashville. City-wide, business expansion has topped the national charts for five years running. And with that comes the construction cranes. All those people need places to live, right?

Not everyone is delighted. Center-stage recently at Ascend Amphitheatre, a 6,800-seat open-air venue carved into a hillside along the Cumberland River, singer-songwriter Ray LaMontagne lamented, “How many...condos does one city need?”

Point well taken in a town that's traffic-clogged and thick with tourists. But when you're bound for Nashville's Broadway on a fall weekend getaway, who really cares about condos?

As a new generation of music luminaries opens studios and lays down roots, James Beard-caliber dining gives hot chicken a run for its money, and chic boutique hotels add luxe to Nashville lodging, it's clear the town is still making magic—building castles in the sky, but staying true to the gritty rhythms that made it Music City, USA.

Where to see live music

Built by a Nashville riverboat captain, the Union Gospel Tabernacle hosted its first concert in 1892: a performance by the Theodore Thomas Orchestra. Rechristened the Ryman Auditorium in 1905, the storied church today represents all that is holy to the music faithful: stellar acoustics and not a bad seat in the house.

Among the earliest notables on the Ryman stage: Susan B. Anthony, Booker T. Washington, Helen Keller and a handful of American presidents. There were operas and boxing matches and a Vanderbilt football game aired via telegraph. The Russian Imperial Ballet danced, and Charlie Chaplin raised money for war bonds.

And then, in 1943, the Grand Ole Opry took over. For 31 years, the cast called the Ryman home, delighting audiences live and via WSM Radio with homespun faves like Little Jimmy Dickens and Minnie Pearl. Johnny Cash joined in 1956, Patsy Cline in 1950. Though the Grand Ole Opry relocated a few miles outside of town in 1974, the Ryman stage has continued to shine with acts from every genre.

In October and November, the calendar offers John Prine,

Jason Isbell, Lake Street Dive, Iron and Wine, The Beach Boys, and more.

They don't call it the Mother Church for nothing.

Start your Ryman evening with dinner at Lula's Cafe, named for Lula C. Naff, who ran the Ryman for 30 years after serving as its secretary from 1904 to 1920. Pre-show faves: Cafe Salad (kale, sweet potatoes, bleu cheese, walnuts and dried cranberries in a light vinaigrette) and a glass of bubbly, or Lula's Rotisserie Prime Rib for heartier tastes. Try the Rymanhattan and Kiss My Bluegrass cocktails.

For the full Ryman experience, take a backstage tour. Self-guided tours kick off with hologram hosts Sheryl Crow and Darius Rucker, and include an immersive digital history of the Ryman plus ample time to wander exhibits (Johnny Cash's guitar, audio remembrances from Ryman stars) and commune, if you wish, with the ghosts of the Mother Church.

Ryman Auditorium, 116 5th Ave. N., Nashville. 615-889-3060

Where to stay

As you step inside Bobby Hotel, the chandelier commands attention. Soaring over the lobby and grand staircase, the enormous sculpture of car parts hovers, impossibly, its gleaming jumble of chrome and metal reflecting the warm tones of the decor. As you shake off the hubbub from Printers Alley, the Arcade and the Musicians Hall of Fame and Museum, all just a stone's throw away, you settle into the mood of the newest addition to Nashville's boutique hotel scene: eclectic, energetic, cowboy-chic.

The vibe continues in Bobby's 144 pet-friendly guest rooms and suites, outfitted with thoughtful accents like bath towels embroidered with the face of

Sasha, the resident rescue dog. Each towel is yours to keep for \$25, which Bobby will donate to Country Road Animal Rescue.

Four dining options include the Tavern at Bobby and the Cafe, both of which make Bobby a destination not just for out-of-town guests but for biz lunchers and locals. Down a graffiti-glazed stairway is Bobby's Garage Bar, where the car motif continues with salvaged parts fashioned into artwork and lighting fixtures. Live music begins in the fall.

At the rooftop lounge, a 1956 Greyhound Scenicruiser bus idles ten stories above 4th Avenue, outfitted with cocktail seating and a view of the iconic skyline. Cozy cabanas offer poolside privacy, and beyond the bar, an open deck hosts private parties. Behold the view across the Cumberland River, Nissan Stadium and points beyond.

Look for original artwork by longtime Elton John collaborator Bernie Taupin, and strategically placed clues to the secret identity of Bobby—“Mad Men”-esque family vacay snaps, a stack of hardcover books, an old-school typewriter and more. If you figure out who Bobby is, let us know.

Bobby Hotel, 230 4th Ave N., 615-782-7100

From the glittery crush of Broadway's honkytonks to the hallowed Ryman and the upstart indie clubs, music is everywhere.

Where to eat and experience history

A lunch counter stretches along the length of Woolworth on 5th, nestled under a mezzanine where original chairs, hand-laid tiles and elegant deco fixtures honor the past lives of this iconic space—once a five-and-dime where history unfolded. Photos of Civil Rights icon John Lewis line the walls in powerful tribute to the sit-ins of the '60s, including the first time the future Congressman, then a Nashville student, was arrested for non-violent protest.

Opened early this year, the restaurant aims to commemorate that era of American history with a welcoming, bright space, open and airy, lively with gospel and R&B music. The deco style, beautifully restored from the exterior facade to the terrazzo floors, sets the stage for an always-evolving menu of local and global tastes.

Faves: fried green tomatoes with goat cheese, fried chicken (ask for Nashville-hot) with country green beans, whipped potatoes and mac-and-cheese. Don't leave without sharing the RC Cola float, topped with a honey cookie Moonpie.

Go anytime, but Oct. 9 looks like a night to remember as Woolworth on 5th joins 10 other restaurants for "Louisiana in Nashville," a Cajun-chef takeover of Music City dining hot spots. Madonna Broussard from Lafayette's iconic Laura's II will helm Woolworth on 5th—hopefully serving up her turkey wings, made famous by the late Anthony Bourdain in a final episode of *Parts Unknown*.

Woolworth on 5th, 221 5th Ave. N., 615-891-1361

Where to see art

The main Nashville post office opened on Broadway in 1934, a "spare" classical monument to the era's emphasis on frugality and refined taste. Inside is another story. Renovated and repurposed as the Frist Museum of Art in 1999, the skylight-bright interior features gorgeous grillwork and tinted marble staircases, highlights of the deco stylings that make the building itself a destination as much as the exhibitions that grace its galleries.

Visit before Oct. 14, the closing date for "We Shall Overcome: Civil Rights and the Nashville Press, 1957-1968." The exhibition strikingly documents the important role the city played in the era, with 50 photographs culled from the two daily newspapers published at the time.

Switching gears, the Frist's Ingram Gallery opens "Paris 1900: City of Entertainment" on Oct. 12. More than 250 paintings, photos and sculptures including Rodin's stunning "Cupid and Psyche" will bring to life the opulence of Belle Epoque Paris. Among the costumes and accessories: "Pair of boots," ca. 1900-1905. This is Nashville, after all.

Don't miss the guided museum tour, every Saturday at 4:30 p.m. *Frist Museum of Art, 919 Broadway, 615-244-3340*

More to see and do

• **The Grand Ole Opry**, now part of the Gaylord Opryland Resort in the suburbs, is a Nashville must. Take the tour for a peek inside the dressing rooms, mailboxes (note to Dolly: girl, you've got mail), and backstage haunts of country's biggest stars. Be sure to get your picture taken on stage with the famous WSM Radio-650 AM mic—and then stay for a show.

• **House of Cards** is making magic below the Johnny Cash Museum. You read that right—in the basement. Take the secret staircase down, down, down into a world of illusion, art-work and memorabilia, where speakeasy meets magic club and fine dining. Craft cocktails, a diverse menu and roaming magicians make this a unique destination amid the bustle of Broadway.

• **12South** truly has it all: dining, coffee shops, fashion, music and more. The walkable haute 'hood hasn't forgotten the past, though. Stop in to Corner Music, where old-timers mingle with starry-eyed youngsters looking for the perfect axe, and then grab some java at Frothy Monkey, an original Nashville coffeehouse before coffeehouses were a thing. And find the perfect outfit for your Music City nights at Emerson Grace, a stylish respite from the ubiquitous touristy tees-n-jeans — and a super-friendly staff, to boot.

• **Bespoke Experiences** will take you anywhere you want to go—and some places you didn't even know you wanted to go. Discover Nashville luxe-style, guided by a local expert. Interested in history? Gibson guitars from the mid-'40s? Architectural gems and fine dining, or all of the above? Bespoke creates exclusive experiences crafted to your specific desires—an ideal way to get to know Music City.



Even the Frist Museum of Art exhibition, "Paris in 1900: City of Entertainment," has a pair of boots (ca. 1900-1905). This is Nashville, after all.