

# a love song to music city, usa

By Jan Schroder



More than 25 years. That's how long it had been since I'd visited Nashville, when I'd been madly in love with a student at Vanderbilt. He dumped me and broke my heart and I hadn't been back since. It's not like I'd been avoiding the place — I just hadn't had a reason to go. But with an invitation to the singer-songwriter festival Tin Pan South, and a son who was heading to Vanderbilt in the fall, I grabbed my red cowboy boots and two-stepped my way back. And fell in love all over again. With the city that is. Hey — I'm thinkin' there may just be a country music song in all of this. As Hank Williams said, "A song ain't nothin' in the world but a story just wrote with music to it."

## >stay

The new independent luxury Hutton Hotel is elegantly beautiful and within walking distance of Vanderbilt. It's green throughout and even has card readers for electricity that I've previously only seen in Europe. During Parents' Weekend in the fall we stayed at the Doubletree Hotel downtown, primarily because it was within walking distance to Honky Tonk Row. The Hilton Nashville Downtown is another good choice for its proximity to the sights and restaurants. We were told that the legendary "Tutti Frutti" Little Richard lives in the hotel.

## >savor

It's about a 20-minute drive from downtown to Loveless Café, but if you have any hankering at all for Southern cooking and biscuits you can gobble by the basket full, it's a must. Waits can be really long, but you can kill time by heading to the gift shop. Be sure to catch the Biscuit Lady Carol Fay's TV clips. We laughed ourselves silly watching an episode of *Conan O'Brien*, when he attempted to make biscuits with her. It ended up with a gooey mess and him wiping his dough-encrusted hands on the curtain behind him.

For a more elegant experience, try Acorn, where I savored every bite of my chorizo and potato-crust halibut with Jack Daniel's pecan cream sauce. Or lunch at the 1808 Grille in the Hutton Hotel, where they've been raking in awards for the delicious new American cuisine.

During Parents' Weekend I searched for a restaurant not too far from our hotel and found Germantown Café, located across the river in historic Germantown. The service was excellent and my request for a table by the window was fulfilled, affording us a beautiful view of the Nashville skyline. My daughter and I declared our French onion soup the best we'd ever had, as was the coconut curry salmon.

My favorite breakfast place downtown was Wild Bill's Beignets and Bikes, where you can check out the motorcycle paraphernalia while you wait for freshly made sugar-covered beignets that melt in your mouth.

## >see

In Nashville I discovered I actually like country music. Seems my nasal-sounding hick impression of it was way too

narrow, and I have a newfound appreciation for the genre. My inspiration was Tin Pan South, where I was introduced to a steady stream of incredibly talented singer-songwriters. This annual spring festival features more than 250 musicians in 70 shows. I learned a new meaning for the term "in the round," which does not refer to the shape of the stage, but rather a performance involving a small group of singer-songwriters who all remain on the stage and take turns performing, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar. One show at 3rd & Lindsley included Amy Grant, Wayne Kirkpatrick, Phil Madeira and Gordon Kennedy. I loved the intimacy of the venue and the stories they told about each song. Fans went wild when Amy's husband, Vince Gill, briefly joined in.

If you can't make it to a festival in Nashville, finding live music is as easy as heading over to Honky Tonk Row on Broadway. Music starts mid-morning and goes to the wee hours. Most places don't have a cover, so you can just stroll from one to the other taking in lots of talent. Be sure to step inside Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, where many famous songwriters, including Willie Nelson, got their start. He wrote *Crazy* here and sold it to Patsy Cline, for a reported \$50.

It's a bit of a drive, but if your schedule allows, visit the Grand Ole Opry, America's longest running live radio show, started in 1925. The Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center is larger than most towns in the South, and worth a bit of time to explore on its own. Wear comfortable shoes!

Any music fan will enjoy a visit to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Opened in 2001, it houses the world's largest collection of country music paraphernalia, including such treasures as Elvis's old gold Cadillac and his 24-karat-gold piano, videos of Dolly Parton singing and Mel Tillis talking about the craft of songwriting. There's a cornucopia of history surrounding this music genre, which really spread during World War II, when many southerners worked in the defense industry. After heightened exposure, "Hillbilly fever" became big business in the 1950s.

One of my favorite quotes noted here is from Barbara Mandrell, who said, "The bus is probably the most important instrument in country music."

The museum also operates Studio B, located on Music Row. This tiny studio produced big, big hits, including more than 1,000 top ten American singles. Elvis recorded 150 of his songs here, more than anywhere else.

Nashville is called Music City, but it isn't all country. It is also home to one of the most gorgeous symphony halls I have ever seen. The Schermerhorn Symphony Center is one of the few in the country to feature natural interior light and also has a convertible seating system where the orchestra level seats roll down below the surface allowing for table-type configurations for dinners or jazz concerts. If you can't attend an event here, take a free tour offered most days at 1:00 p.m.

Nashville has plenty of other attractions as well. I loved visiting Andrew Jackson's home, The Hermitage, now a 1,120-acre property just 15 minutes from downtown. The Parthenon, located in beautiful Centennial Park, is the world's only