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THE TALK

Nashville's Band of Outsiders

By ANN PATCHETT

This is my confession: I live in [Nashville](#) and I don't listen to country [music](#). It is not such an uncommon state of affairs. Carrie Underwood's album has sold over six million copies, and yet I don't know a single person who owns it. Of course I like the old country music — Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, Hank Sr. But I cannot connect the dots, in fact I believe there are no dots, between Patsy and Carrie.

That said, if you poke around anywhere in my hometown you will discover an endless assortment of small clubs and cafes where musicians prove nightly that the coolest music scene today is in Nashville. In the same way that ingenious independent films get made in [Los Angeles](#), the city that is at this very moment no doubt working on “Die Hard 15,” Nashville in its spare time is making, dare I say it, art — unexpected and darkly fascinating music whose renegade spirit has been learned from everybody and is beholden to no one.

Maybe you didn't notice; it's easy to move under the radar when the radar is set by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill. But Nashville is a place where musicians of all kinds come to work and to live. Like New York and Los Angeles, it's an American city of dreams — where you go when you decide to put everything on the line and bet on yourself. For that reason, it's also a city with plenty of pawnshops and cheap bars. Seven nights a week the downtown strip is a weird combination of tourists, T-shirt shops and truly inspired singing. Finding a good music club in Nashville is about as challenging as finding good pizza in [Sicily](#). Throw a rock in any direction, you'll hit one: the Mercy, the Basement, the [Station Inn](#), the [Bluebird Cafe](#).

I learned to see all this when I ran into an old college friend of mine in the gym not long ago. Diana Jones and I went to school in New York, and when I knew her she was the coolest girl around. She played guitar and sang rocking Joan Armatrading covers in the coffeehouse. Now she lives in Nashville and writes her own songs, which she sings in such a haunting high lonesome that one can't help but wonder if she isn't the lost daughter of the Carter Family. “You can't live as cheaply in Austin or any of the artsy centers anymore,” she said when I asked why she'd moved here. She used to live in Austin. She used to live in a lot of places. She came here from Northampton, Mass. “I'm a songwriter. I go to bed at 2 a.m., I get up at 10. The community wasn't there.”

Diana lives in East Nashville; it's where she bought what may well be the last \$38,000 house in history. In fact, most of the people who are making the music I've come to love

are living in East Nashville. It's what you'd call up-and-coming, which is to say there are lots of fabulous old brick manses that look like they belong on the cover of a Lemony Snicket novel, all turrets and bell towers and leaded windows, and in between those fabulous manses (some renovated, some not), there are plenty of ratty bungalows. It isn't the side of town where people tend to play (although I hear there are quite a few secret recording studios, hiding behind closed doors because of zoning laws). This is where they sleep and go to the grocery store and hang out in bars and coffee shops like the Family Wash and the 5-Spot, working on songs. There's now even a CD of those songs, called "The Other Side: Music From East Nashville."

It's where Todd Snider came to live 10 years ago. "When I got here, it felt like Austin in the '70s," he told me. "Everybody on your street's a musician, too. It's as close as I'll get to Greenwich Village, or that fantasy I had about it when I was a kid. We talk about songs. We don't talk about the money around songs."

Everybody, in my opinion, should be talking about Todd Snider's songs. The man is the troubadour for our times, an inventive cross of Dylan and Kristofferson with just the right dash of Tom Petty thrown in. He likes to play the Belcourt, an old theater that often hosts music while showing art-house films.

It is possible to walk back and forth between the two theaters and see a local band like Brother Henry and a showing of "The 400 Blows" at the same time.

It's hard to know exactly what to call this genre that sounds sort of like old country music and nothing like the new country music. But in the last few years, most of it has gotten swept together under the heading of Americana, a label that is broad and blurry enough to welcome everyone who isn't getting played on mainstream radio. Jed Hilly, the new executive director of the Americana Music Association, says the music honors, and is derived from, the traditions of American roots music. That, he tells me, encompasses everyone from Gram Parsons and the Band to Lucinda Williams and Lyle Lovett. People who you would think are the very cornerstones of country music — Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash — are now called Americana, and in that case Americana is what we'd loved all along. Of course it's also what Nashville has made for decades, and it's the reason this city keeps drawing in talented folks from the fringes of the radio dial.

Jeff Burke and Vida Wakeman of the Jeff and Vida band came here from [New Orleans](#) to try and make it big, and even if that hasn't happened yet (and it should happen soon), Nashville is working out fine for them. In a city that values its rhinestones, they are managing to make music that is real and true, the thing itself as opposed to a parody of the thing. Theirs are the songs you long to hear late at night on the interstate, in pool halls and

smoky whiskey bars. Jeff and Vida like to play at the 12 South Taproom and Norm's River Road House, the kind of bars that sound like they could be names of their songs.

Ketch Secor, who plays in the band Old Crow Medicine Show, has moved back to Nashville after a few years away. When I talk to him, he's sitting in his backyard in East Nashville listening to [Woody Guthrie](#). He says he's glad to be back. If it was up to him, he thinks his music should be called country and country music should be called Americana. "I think the small and belittling label should be given to country music," he says. That, of course, is a genius solution. The word Americana seems to fit Carrie Underwood (Americana Idol?), whereas country would be a better fit for Old Crow, which is doing something that has all the raw energy and seeming spontaneity of the Smokey Mountain Boys but with the archness of the [Rolling Stones](#) singing "Far Away Eyes."

It feels like the music that happens when talented country folk get together, as opposed to the music that happens when talented producers hire pretty girls. When I ask him where he likes to play, Ketch points out that the Grand Ole Opry House, the bastion of that other country music, "has one of the best-sounding stages I've ever been on." It surprises me that it would be his kind of place, but when I mention it to Gillian Welch, she concurs. "That stage loves Ketch's harmonica," she says.

Every stage loves Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, from the bluegrass heaven of the Station Inn to the brand-new Schermerhorn Symphony Center. Gillian and David are the universal donors; no matter what genre of music you like or don't like, you'll love what they're doing. Gillian was the person who was able to explain to me why Nashville came to be Music City, USA, something I should have known, seeing as how I've been here most of my life. It turns out it was all a matter of geography.

"It's amazing where you can get to in a car in 12 hours," she said. "Hank Williams knew this. You can go out, play your gigs, and still get to the Opry. Of course that's not why I came. I had this really romantic notion of the music that was being made here. Little did I know I'd be arriving 30 years too late."

Even so, I give Gillian the most credit for turning back the clock, or taking it way ahead, depending on how you look at it. And whether she's really too late or positively cutting-edge all depends on how you're listening on any given night. After all, the best of Nashville is so out-of-date it's new again.

ESSENTIALS: NASHVILLE

The Americana Music Festival & Conference will be held from Oct. 31 to Nov. 3. You can go to the music industry panels during the day, but you're better off sleeping through them

so you can stay up all night traveling from one club to the next. A \$30 wristband lets you into the clubs. Go to <http://www.americanamusic.org/>.

Music

The Basement ,1604 Eighth Avenue South; (615) 254-8006. [Belcourt Theater](#), 2102 Belcourt Avenue; (615) 846-3150. Bluebird Cafe, 4104 Hillsboro Road; (615) 383-1461. [Douglas Corner Cafe](#), 2106-A Eighth Avenue South; (615) 298-1688. Mercy Lounge, 1 Cannery Row; (615) 251-3020. Norm's River Road House, 7695 River Road Pike; (615) 356-6314. Station Inn, 402 12th Avenue South; (615) 255-3307. 12 South Taproom & Grill, 2318 12th Avenue South; (615) 463-7552.

Bars and Restaurants

Family Wash, 2038 Greenwood Avenue; (615) 226-6070; entrees about \$7 to \$15. 5 Spot, 1006 Forrest Avenue; (615) 650-9333; entrees \$6 to \$8.

Hotel

[The Hermitage](#). This recently restored beauty is the most luxurious option in town and a refreshing alternative to Nashville's numerous chain hotels. 231 Sixth Avenue North; (615) 244-3121; <http://www.thehermitagehotel.com/>; doubles from \$249.