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Dave Grohl, Town Mountain, Midland, Elle King and others have performed at the Orange Peel.

## **Why Asheville, North Carolina, Is the New Must-Visit Music City**

Artists and fans alike have been flocking to the Blue Ridge Mountains town, drawn by its reputation for musical spontaneity

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Dave Grohl had never been to Asheville, and when a wicked snowstorm hit the same December weekend that he played Warren Haynes' annual Christmas Jam in the North Carolina town, the Foo Fighters leader wondered if he'd ever leave. Socked in by feet of snow, Grohl couldn't fly out. But instead of holing up in his hotel, he decided to put together an impromptu show at a venue he kept hearing people rave about.

"Everyone was talking about this place the Orange Peel," he told Rolling Stone late last winter. "I just imagined it was going to be some corner pub with a six-inch stage with one monitor and half a PA, and then someone said it holds a thousand people. I didn't know if anyone was going to come, but I didn't want to sit around my hotel room doing nothing."

After playing a surprise set of Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Nirvana covers for an intently listening, tightly packed crowd of music lovers, Grohl learned what so many other music fans have been discovering: Asheville is becoming one of the country's most vital music hubs.

"There's always been an underground scene of music, with a lot of great musicians, but only in the past 15 or 20 years has it risen to the level that it is now," says Haynes, the former Allman Brothers Band guitarist and unofficial mayor of the town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains on the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Haynes was raised there and watched its music community thrive over the years. "There is a whole kind of bohemian subculture thing going on that is really impressive and organic."

Aside from Asheville's already well-known brewery and outdoor industries — beer and hiking are ways of life here — it's music that ties the community together. The town is rife with venues, from Grohl's club of choice the Orange Peel to the Grey Eagle, the Mothlight, Asheville Music Hall and the pub Jack of the Wood, where polka bands play alongside folksingers. At the 5 Walnut wine bar, crowds spill over onto the sidewalk to hear jazz combo the John Henrys. In the taprooms of beer meccas like Highland Brewery and Twin Leaf Brewery, singer-songwriters soundtrack drinking sessions. Buskers dot street corners and drum circles pop up weekly in downtown's Pritchard Park.

Rock, world, hip-hop and electronic are readily discoverable, but it's Americana and bluegrass that reign as the predominant sound. Many artists in those genres have made Asheville their homebase, furthering the city's growing reputation as an Americana hotbed. The Steep Canyon Rangers, Town Mountain, River Whyless, Jon Stickley Trio, Rising Appalachia and Marcus King Band all reside or have once lived in the area. For the guitar phenom King, the town launched his career.

"Asheville is a coming-of-age story to me. The first concert I ever snuck into was Widespread Panic at the Civic Center, and I snuck under the gate and paid the security guard off and he let me onto the floor. When I was 15, I was almost thrown in jail, 'cause I snuck into the Orange Peel to try and give Warren Haynes a demo," says King, who more legitimately hooked up with Haynes through mutual friends years later and found a mentor. "Asheville has always been a place where I cut my teeth."

Now a Nashville resident, King maintains strong ties with his former community. For the past two years, he's returned to host his Marcus King Band Family Reunion at Pisgah Brewery in nearby Black Mountain, North Carolina. The 2018 installment attracted a jam-heavy crowd, who vibed to sets by outlaw songwriter Nikki Lane, Nashville soul band DeRobert & the Half-Truths and bluegrass phenom Billy Strings. King's night-ending performance included a cameo by Strings, who tore through an electric "Orange Blossom Special," a symbolic nod to both the bluegrass history of the region and its Americana present.

"There is something about Asheville that is hip. It's always been this place where hippies and people who are thinking about the planet, and are into bluegrass music, tend to move," Strings says of the town's reputation for stoking the creative muse. "You wake up in Asheville, have a cup of tea, grab your instrument and smoke a joint and play some tunes. It's a beautiful place to be."

But natural beauty isn't all that has been attracting players. Asheville is also home to the church-turned-studio Echo Mountain Recording, where artists as diverse as the War on Drugs, White Denim, Zac Brown Band, Blackberry Smoke, Turnpike Troubadours and Dierks Bentley

have all cut albums, along with locals Steep Canyon Rangers and fellow North Carolinians the Avett Brothers. Echo Mountain's pristine acoustics have made it a destination studio, with bands booking time to record in a room specifically constructed to amplify and carry the human voice. Standing in the main room, with its stained glass windows and vestibules stocked with a Guitar Center's worth of gear, it's hard not to feel inspired.

"It's palpable. You can feel it in the air," says Jesse Langlais of Town Mountain, the IBMA Award-winning newgrass band. He's speaking of the studio, but expands his thought to include Asheville in general. "What sets it apart from a city like Nashville is it's a little more down-home, more close-knit. I think the reason why is that the industry, by and large, is left out of the equation."

A little less than five hours to the west, Nashville and its star-making system is readily accessible for ambitious bands eager to raise their commercial profile. But Langlais, who moved to Asheville from Maine in 2001, says that Asheville's secret appeal is its isolation from Music Row — as well as a certain sense of ambivalence when it comes to "making it."

"People aren't necessarily there because they're trying to push their musical agenda. They're there because they want to be part of the scene," he says. "It's pure music fans who are there solely for the music, not the industry."

That mindset helps explain the more niche festivals that are springing up around Asheville. Haynes' Christmas Jam charity benefit, which marked its 30th year in 2018 with Grohl, Eric Church and Jim James, may be the most famous, but others have also become part of the local fabric. The Asheville Electro-Music Festival celebrates EDM and electronic music (the Moog synthesizer factory is in Asheville); the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival highlights the old-time sounds of Appalachia; and April's Connect Beyond Festival seeks to spark societal change through the written word and musical performance. Grammy winner Fantastic Negrito headlines this year.

Haynes says the increasingly diverse lineup of his Christmas Jams reflect the town's growth and its reputation as a must-visit music city, one that he compares to Austin.

"It's symbolic of what has happened with Asheville as a community," he says. "When I was growing up, we didn't have many venue options and now there are more and more. I see that happening in different ways all over the country, especially in little towns in the South, but Asheville has something special going."

Town Mountain's Langlais agrees. He's seen an influx of fresh talent in the last few years.

"There is a whole new crop of bluegrass musicians moving here. I don't know a lot of these kids, but it's a fairly large population of people. It's similar to the path that the Town Mountain fellas found ourselves on 18 years ago, moving here because of the rich bluegrass and old-time music scene," he says, singling out a certain musical "spontaneity" of Asheville.

"It permeates the food culture and the beer culture and the art culture. This town is full of great musicians."