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TRAVEL

Women singer-songwriters in spotlight in Music City

Women singer-songwriters are in the spotlight in the city's live music scene thrives.

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star

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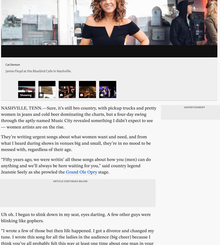

Jul Harman

Jamie Floyd at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville

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NASHVILLE, TENN.—Sure, it's still live country, with pickup trucks and pretty women in jeans and cold beer dominating the charts, but a four-day swing through the aptly named Music City revealed something I didn't expect to see — women artists are on the rise.

They're writing organ songs about what women want and need, and from what I heard during shows in venues big and small, they're in no mood to be mowed with, regardless of their age.

"Fifty years ago, we were all thinking songs about how you (men) can do anything and we'll always be here waiting for you," said country legend Jeannie Seely as she preached the Grand Ole Opry stage.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

Uh oh. I began to slink down in my seat, eyes darting. A few other guys were blinking like gophers.

"I wrote a few of those but then life happened. I got a divorce and changed my tune. I wrote this song for all the ladies in the audience (big cheer) because I think you've all probably felt this way at least one time about one man in your life. It's called, 'Who Needs You?'"

The honky tonks and music clubs along downtown Lower Broadway draw tourists day and night.

Nashville Convention & Visitors Bureau

I sank further as women around me clapped and hooted and stamped their feet at the 4,400-seat venue, which has sleek concession stands for drinks and food and, boy, I needed a beer.

Years ago, Seely fought to be the first woman Opry host and once had a dust-up with management over wearing a miniskirt onstage. When she brought out Carrie Underwood, the current country queen belted out "Blown Away," about a daughter who locks herself in a storm cellar as a tornado advances toward her mom, alcoholic father passed out upstairs.

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Ladies 2, men, nothin'.

We'd stood in a long line to get into the Opry (tickets run from $38 to $89 U.S. and more if you want a backstage tour). At first, I'd dismissed it as a needless travel checklist item, but now I highly recommend it. The stage attracts top stars (Vince Gill and Reba McEntire were also on the bill that night) and it's a compelling slice of Americana.

The next day, when a flock of cowboy-hatted bachelorettes stopped traffic during my afternoon walk along downtown's Lower Broadway (Nashville's relative affordability and the more than 100 live music venues are a draw for seen-to-be brides and their entourages), free rock, blues and even a twist on jazz boomed onto the bustling sidewalks.

As crews dot the swiftly changing skyline, Nashville is making waves in food, art, fashion and, of course, music. The city can move you like a pinball into unexpected directions, given its kaleidoscopic variety. Edit In and The Merry Lounge are just a few of the stages where you can experience a wide range of new music beyond what's traditionally considered country. The Listening Room features female singer-songwriters weekly.

Singer and songwriter Tobi Lee performs at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville.

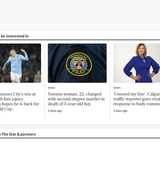
Mike Fisher for Nashville.com

Even so, it's not all Sunshine & Rainbows — the title of Nashville singer-songwriter Jamie Floyd's self-funded EP. For her and most emerging women artists, it's a daily struggle.

At the Bluebird Café, a photo of Willy Nelson with his eyes closed, cradling his guitar, overturns the small stage. Jarred candles on round tables glow like caged fireflies, here and there among bottles of wine and beer. Though just a 20-minute or so drive from the Opry, in size and hype, it's a world away.

I saw Floyd perform at the Bluebird during a Women in the Round night. The intimate, 90-seat club showcased on the television show Nashville is a mainstay for performances by experienced, as well as up-and-coming, singer-songwriters. You'll line up to get in (there's a $15 cover charge and a $10 food and drink minimum per person). It's worth it.

Earlier that afternoon, I'd coincidentally visited the restaurant Lockeland Table in historic East Nashville, one of the city's burgeoning food-and-drink scenes. It's where Floyd waited tables and mopped floors until this April, even as she was a Grammy-nominated songwriter for "The Blade," which became the title track for Ashley Monroe's album. Her boyfriend, singer/songwriter, by chef Ed Hodden Bacha's signature grilled steak with his chimichurri, and get the Olive & Smokin' Chocolate Chip Cookie Skillet for dessert.



The Country Music Hall of Fame houses the Taylor Swift Education Center among various exhibits.

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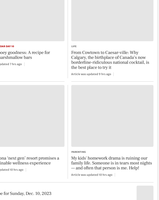
For Floyd, it's been a Cinderella story, of sorts, with no promise of a fairy tale ending. She's in the new Burt Reynolds' movie, Dog Years, coming in 2018, with her songs as well as her playing in the film. She's also in a documentary about the Nashville Songwriters Association, which will be at the Toronto Film Festival. It tells the story of how songwriters are now paid less than a thousandth of a penny for a streamed song, forcing many to leave the business and give up.

Still, there is much to admire and enjoy when seeing women artists in Nashville. At Tobi Lee (who heats up the band Morning Sally) took the Bluebird stage and sang her song "Real Woman." C'Ya get stuck stacks on both of my laps, I've got notebooks from unstuck on my lips ... "), along with her songs about cheating and women dancing badly, the audience couldn't get enough.

While exploring East Nashville, I stumbled onto Fanny's House of Music. Inside, salesperson Callan Dwan, who's in the rock band Binary, explained women started the guitar store for women customers.



Callan Dwan, a member of the rock band Binary, works at Fanny's House of Music in East Nashville, a store for women guitarists.

Mike Fisher for Nashville.com

At the Taylor Swift Education Center in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, which encourages kids to learn songwriting, a sign by Swift reads: "I was 12 when I heard the first three chords on guitar and wrote my first song. My life changed forever . . . music became the way I told my stories."

Every woman songwriter I met in Nashville had an entertaining story. You can hear them in venues throughout the city. Maybe you'll catch a rising star. As it once was for Seely, the story is just beginning.

Mike Fisher was hosted by Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation, which didn't review or approve this story.

When you go:

Get there/around: Air Canada and WestJet both fly to Nashville. I strongly recommend a rental car. Otherwise, the ride service Lyft, which I used you'll need the app, is very popular.

Stay: I stayed at the massive Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center, a 16-kilometre drive from Nashville International Airport or a half hour's drive from downtown. There are indoor and outdoor pools and 2.4 hectares of indoor gardens and waterfalls.

Eat: It's a foodie's city and you'll find everything here. I had great fried chicken and waffles with gravy at the iconic Loveless Café, but my favourite few hours of dining happened with Walk Eat Nashville, which offers fun, walkable food tours ($50) in city neighborhoods. I did East Nashville with time to explore on my own.

Do your research: VisitMusicCity.com

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