



High Note

Some are hoping for a big break. Others have already made it. At this high-strung Nashville festival, songwriters shine as old hits are reborn and new ones unveiled. The best part: Music lovers get to meet the real talent, and hear the real stories, behind the tunes.

BY NANCY HENDERSON WURST
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTA LEE

Danny Flowers (right), best known for writing "Tulsa Time" for Eric Clapton and Don Williams, performs at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville. Darrell Scott (center, in red shirt), a Grammy Award-winning songwriter, strums along.



Nashville's Bluebird Cafe is hushed as a church when a brawny songwriter named Darrell Scott tells the story behind the next tune. "I wrote this after I hurt my back and had to lie on a concrete floor 'cause that's all I could do," he recalls. "I was so grateful to sit up after that week, just glad to cook some soup, do ordinary things." Without further introduction, he picks up his guitar and, in a soulful Hal Ketchum-meets-Marc Cohn style, starts to sing:

I got rice cooking in the microwave

I got a three-day beard I don't plan to shave

And it's a goofy thing, but I just gotta say, I'm doing all right

I think I'll make me some homemade soup

I'm feeling pretty good and that's the truth

It's neither drink- nor drug-induced, no, I'm just doing all right

And it's a great day to be alive ...

Scott's interpretation of "It's a Great Day To Be Alive" is bluesier than the radio version, with Cajun undertones, and all around me, heads nod. Shoulders sway. Boots and Nikes and Birkenstocks tap along.

Scott's painfully intimate vocal detour, sans guitar, near the end of the song makes the hairs stand up on my arms. As soon as the applause subsides — and this takes a while — fellow songwriter Danny Flowers wryly suggests from his stool next to Scott's, "Hey, maybe you oughta pitch that to somebody."

"It's a Great Day To Be Alive," Travis Tritt's simple-as-it-gets 2000 comeback hit, is just one of many well-known yet not-so-recognizable songs performed at the Bluebird tonight. For two hours, the Grammy Award-winning Scott performs with Flowers, a wiry-haired, laid-back fellow best known for Eric Clapton's "Tulsa Time"; Kevin Welch, who's penned songs for Waylon Jennings, Roger Miller, and Trisha Yearwood, and who, in this dim light, could pass for Neil Young; and Harley Allen, whose acerbic wit as one of the Soggy Bottom Boys on the multiplatinum *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack belies the tender ballads he's written for Alison Krauss and Alan Jackson. The four men sing of hard times, good times, average and extraordinary times. They strum. They pluck. They slide nimble fingers across guitar frets, sometimes together, sometimes solo, all the while holding our attention as well as any concert-hall headliners, maybe better.

It's all part of Tin Pan South, the nation's largest music festival dedicated to songs and the people who write them. Named

Surprise performer Teddy Gentry (center), of the legendary band Alabama, plays for a mesmerized crowd at the Bluebird Cafe.



after New York's fabled Tin Pan Alley, the five-day spring event features more than 250 performers, from legendary hit-makers to promising new talent. This isn't just for country fans, either; in its 15 years, Tin Pan South has hosted the likes of Donna Summer, Gordon Lightfoot, and Peter Frampton, and showcased genres ranging from pop and folk to jazz and show tunes. At a smattering of offbeat, hole-in-the-wall venues, writers try out new lyrics, play proven crowd-pleasers, and, best of all, share their stories. Most shows take place unplugged and "in the round," with four artists facing one another in a square.

"You haven't really heard the song till you hear it by the person who wrote it," says David Petrelli, membership manager for the Nashville Songwriters Association International, which represents 5,000 songwriters worldwide and tackles tough issues like copyright infringement and royalty legislation. "More than anything else, Tin Pan South is a celebration of the song and the writer, not the performer and the hit. There are no pyrotechnics here."

The Nashville music scene is divided into two eras: pre-Garth and post-Garth.

Twenty-four years after its debut in an obscure strip mall in what is now the hip Hillshoro district, the Bluebird Cafe is queen of the Nashville "listening rooms." At tonight's irreverent "Born To Be Mild" show, grandmothers and businessmen get their groove on next to metro-Millennials, aging hippies, and urban cowboys. The writers regale us with songs of rejection and revenge, love and loss, PMS and broken-down cars, often shifting the mood from raunchy to prayerful and back again. Near the show's end, Allen invites a young man in a black baseball cap

to join him. It's Dierks Bentley, the curly-haired heartthrob whose sexy "Come a Little Closer" shot up the country charts in 2006. He's been sitting two tables away from me the whole time.

"This is amazing," Bentley tells the audience. "I come back from the road and get to hear the *real* talent."

Allen grins, then sets up the song. "Me and my wife had a fight one day and I wrote this. I asked her, 'Honey, is there somebody else?' And she said, 'There's gotta be.'"

The duo then offers a stirring rendition of "My Last Name" from Bentley's first major CD. Remarkably, the crowd doesn't mob him for autographs; outside after the show, I spot the megastar strolling down the dark sidewalk next to the Bluebird, free from the usual clamor of fans.

The Nashville music scene is divided into two eras: pre-Garth and post-Garth. In the old days, an aspiring writer could saunter into Sony or Warner or BMI, plop down a demo, and ask for an audition. Today, the locked doors are hard to pry open, and

Music Row is more focused on money and branding, less on original art. That's why Tin Pan South is so important, says Flowers, who, in a rare stroke of luck, cut a record his first day in Nashville 35 years ago. "When I got here, [Kris] Kristofferson was here and Johnny Cash and all the really powerful songwriters. It was the beginning of the revolution against The Man as far as the recording industry. People like Waylon Jennings said, 'No, I'm gonna make this record the way I wanna do it.'"

"Songwriting back then was a passion. It seemed like most of the major publishers in town all got together after work every afternoon, had a glass of wine. It was more of a camaraderie, a friendly competition. It's more of a business now. It's more like *American Idol*: 'Hurry up and sing the song, and sing it with feeling.' That's not art to me."

The next night, my husband, Mark, and I make our way through the impossibly thick crowd at 3rd & Lindsley Bar and Grill, to a wobbly table in the balcony above the stage. A statuesque blonde plants herself in front of me; when I ask her to move over, she glares at me with alpha female disdain, the kind that says, "Tough." More people file into the bar, trailing the scent of cigarettes copped before heading inside. By the time the show starts, the place is packed tighter than Dolly Parton's bra.

I've been looking forward to hearing Mac Davis, who wrote monster hits for Elvis Presley, Kenny Rogers, and Glen Campbell; Mark is eager to hear David Pack, lead singer, guitarist, and writer for rock group

Ambrosia. Joining them are Jeffrey Steele and Chuck Cannon, in-demand hit-makers who routinely churn out cover songs for Rascal Flatts, Montgomery Gentry, and Toby Keith. A sea of bodies is blocking my view, so all I can see are Davis' crotch and Pack's keyboard. Oh, well.

The concert is off to a rousing start, with Steele crooning his Van Zant crossover cut "Get Right With the Man." Without missing a beat, Pack launches into "You're the Only Woman" and "Holding on to Yesterday," his voice as strong as ever. The self-effacing Davis entertains the crowd with "It's Hard To Be Humble," followed by its tongue-in-cheek sequel, "It's Hell To Get Old." The writers are just warming up, but already the show is kicked up a notch, or several, from the laid-back performance at the Bluebird. As midnight approaches, the throng clears a bit, and a stocky man vacates his spot near the railing. I grab it, resisting the temptation to shoot the tall blonde a victorious look.

"Tin Pan South is a celebration of the song and the writer, not the performer and the hit."

The show reaches a feverish pitch when Steele belts out a rocking rendition of Montgomery Gentry's "Gone." Halfway through the song, Pack joins in a high-energy instrumental that threatens to spontaneously combust the club and everyone in it. Women squeal. Men whoop. Steele tosses his red-hot guitar pick into the audience and flashes a broad smile. No wonder he's happy — his powerful blue-collar songs, and the artists who've recorded them, are hotter than Nashville in July.

"There's only one way to follow that," Pack says with a shrug, then starts strumming the theme from *Tommy*. The whole place goes nuts. "I didn't write that, though," he says, triggering thunderous applause. "How can you follow Jeffrey Steele with the song I'm about to play? My manager thought this was a number-one single. The producer thought it was a bomb. Fortunately my manager was right." As he wraps up Ambrosia's "That's How Much," Cannon quips, "Hey, has anybody ever told you you sound just like that guy who sings that on the radio?" The crowd goes wild again.

Davis and Pack tell the best stories, perhaps because, as the veterans in the group, they have much more to tell. Davis reveals that he wrote "A Little Less Conversation" for Aretha Franklin, not Elvis. Pack describes a disastrous performance with Kenny Loggins and Michael McDonald, fouled by an errant drummer who messed up at, of all places, President Bill Clinton's inaugural party. The rhythm was so badly bumbled that Bill and Hillary stopped dancing and returned to their seats.

The crowd simply won't let Davis leave without playing his own first number-one hit, "Baby Don't Get Hooked on Me." He obliges, then follows with Elvis' "Memories" before conjuring up some memorable moments from his '70s TV variety show. But the best is yet to come. In 1969, Davis tells us, "I was in England and just starting to get recognition for the songs I wrote for Elvis. I was booked on Lulu's show; she was with Maurice Gibb at the time. Well, after the show, they wanted to have a séance." Davis was skeptical. "What's the matter?" they asked him. "Don't you believe in the occult?" "No, man," he replied. "I believe in music." As Davis strums his guitar and sings the familiar lyrics, his fellow musicians chime in, as does the audience: *I believe in music/I believe in love ...* By the time the show is over, I have forgotten all about the rude blonde.

Jeffrey Steele performs at 3rd & Lindsley in Nashville. He has written hit songs for artists Montgomery Gentry, Faith Hill, and Tim McGraw, to name a few.



Standing room only at Nashville's intimate Bluebird Cafe

When You Go

The 15th annual Tin Pan South takes place March 27-31, 2007; watch for the complete schedule at www.tinpansouth.com about three weeks before the event. Tip: Be sure to take in at least one show without big-name performers. That unassuming songwriter in the cowboy hat might be next year's hot act.

Individual show prices start at \$7, but the best way to club-hop is with a Priority Pass, which covers all admission fees and allows access to venues before cash-only patrons. The Bluebird Cafe performances also require reservations. For more information on the Nashville Songwriters Association International, which turns 40 this year, see www.nashvillesongwriters.com or call (800) 321-6008. —N.H.W.

Readers of Nashville Scene recently voted indie club 12th & Porter second only to the historic Ryman Auditorium as the city's best place to hear live music. We're anxious to see what all the fuss is about, and to hear some of our favorite singer-songwriters, including Kim Carnes and Suzy Bogguss. We plan to make a night of it here, lingering for a second show with super-writers Gary Burr, Richard Marx, Victoria Shaw, and Mark Hudson. Like the rest of the Tin Pan South venues, 12th & Porter is far from the glitz of downtown honky-tonks like Tootsies Orchid Lounge and Wildhorse Saloon.

Inside, there are only eight tables, all reserved, and a handful of barstools that have already been claimed. More patrons file in, then more and more, squeezing into a space not meant for even half this number. We find it difficult to move, much less see the stage. "This is insane," Mark whispers. "You wanna bail?" Moments later, we are outside. At a trendy pizza joint a few blocks away, we sate our appetites, flip through a newspaper, and agree on another venue. It's all part of the phenomenon known as Tin Pan South. If one show doesn't work for you, pick another one. There's plenty to choose from.

We arrive at Douglas Corner Cafe at the end of the first show, just in time to hear John Ford Coley — one-half of the '70s duo with England Dan — perform "Love Is the Answer." Coley and three other writers — Georgia Middleman, Alex Harvey, and Jim Weatherly — face one another in a tight square. A solitary lamp dangles by a long chain from the ceiling, casting a soft glow in the center of the room. "In the '70s I had a pretty good run with Gladys Knight and the Pips," Weatherly says. "Here's probably the best one." His raw, unpolished version of "Midnight Train to Georgia" is so poignant I regret we didn't get here sooner.

After the show, we are ushered outside to wait in line for the next one. (Clubs are cleared between all Tin Pan South double-headers.) Two Atlanta songwriters strike up a conversation behind us, comparing their favorites so far. "Who are you here to see?" the man asks. "Gordon Kennedy, of course," the woman replies. She glances in my direction, clearly expecting me to agree. I've never heard of the guy, but I nod anyway.

This time, we get lucky and stake out a pair of prime seats at one of the long conference tables framing the performers. An

unassuming fellow in a baseball cap sits down in front of us, then turns around and introduces himself. "Hi, I'm Gordon Kennedy," he says with a boyish grin. "What's your name?" We exchange handshakes. "I wanted to meet you now 'cause I'll have my back to you the whole time." I have no idea he authored "Change the World" by Eric Clapton and Babyface, nor that he's played guitar on hundreds of sessions for Jewel, 98 Degrees, and other stars. Younger brother Bryan, seated across from Gordon, is no slouch, either. He's opened for Garth Brooks. He's written for Garth. Heck, he even *looks* like Garth. The siblings come by their talent honestly; their father, Jerry, I later learn, played with Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison, and Tammy Wynette.

Bryan kicks off the show with "American Honky-Tonk Bar Association," then passes the torch to Wayne Kirkpatrick, a Grammy and Dove Award winner with a clean tenor voice and a shyness that prompts the nickname "Loud Wayne." "This is a song that just came out recently, although it was written several years ago," Kirkpatrick begins. Bryan nods sympathetically. As Kirkpatrick performs Little Big Town's 2005 smash debut, "Boondocks," a calm, palpable energy settles over the room, and I hear myself humming along.

Time passes too quickly, with Kirkpatrick, the Kennedy brothers, and collaborator Phil Madeira joking around and experimenting with songs so fresh their ink is barely dry. Kirkpatrick's cohorts concede that his as-yet-uncut tune "Georgia's in Birmingham" is destined for greatness. Their playful banter is almost as entertaining as the music; when Bryan forgets the lyrics to his most recent Garth hit — "Good Ride Cowboy," a memorial to Chris LeDoux — brother Gordon ribs him with a good-natured "Just re-LeDoux it."

This, to me, is the *real* Tin Pan South, with professional, plainspoken songwriters whose egos don't get in the way and a performance that feels like an impromptu session in somebody's living room. All around me, aspiring songwriters lean into the sound, hoping that maybe, one day, they'll take center stage beneath this dim spotlight and tell stories of their own. ☺

Nancy Henderson Wurst has written about Southern people and places for *The New York Times* and *Parade*. She is the author of *Able! How One Company's Disabled Workforce Became the Key to Extraordinary Success* (BenBella Books).