

A photograph of a man in a music studio. He is wearing a blue shirt, dark shorts, and red sneakers, and is playing a dark acoustic guitar. He is holding a vintage-style microphone. To his left is a large wooden rack filled with various electronic equipment, including a mixer and amplifiers. To the far left is a large red double bass. The background shows a glass-paned door leading to another room. The overall lighting is warm and orange-toned.

From Boot Scootin' to Boogie Beats:

**Music Festivals & Venues
that Bring the South to Life**

By Davina van Buren



The South isn't just where music was made—it's where music found its soul. Jazz rose from the revelry of New Orleans' Congo Square, the blues were forged in Mississippi's cotton fields, country harmonised its heartbreak in Tennessee's legendary studios, and Atlanta gave hip hop a new beat.

Whether it's a midnight jam session, front porch bluegrass pickin', or a genre-bending megafestival, the South's musical soul is alive and riffing. That rich heritage echoes through legendary venues and historic studios—and thrives in unexpected places like underground caves and indie festivals full of personality. Here are some of the South's most soulful stops to get your groove on.

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Tennessee

Start Your Journey in Music City

Nashville is the South's undisputed *Music City*. Beyond the honky tonks on Broadway, the city pulses with creativity—from intimate songwriter sessions at the **Bluebird Café** to the hallowed halls of the **Grand Ole Opry**, the world's longest-running radio show which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2025. Take a tour or catch A-list performers at **Ryman Auditorium**, built in the late 1800s to host large-scale church revivals. For a more underground experience, see emerging acts at venues like **The Listening Room Café** or **Exit/In**, where tomorrow's stars play today.

Head southeast to **Memphis**, where fans of "the King" Elvis Presley can tour **Graceland**, the singer's sprawling mansion and estate. The city's musical DNA runs deep through **Sun Studio**, where Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis launched their careers, and along **Beale Street**, which teems with Black history. The **National Civil Rights Museum's** partnership with the **Stax Museum of American Soul Music** tells the intertwined story of music and social change that defines the city. Don't miss the third annual **RiverBeat Music Festival** in May, a three-day celebration along the Mississippi River at **Tom Lee Park** that's become a signature Southern event.

The twin city of **Bristol**, which straddles the Tennessee-Virginia border, claims the title "*Birthplace of Country Music*" thanks to the legendary 1927 **Bristol Sessions**. Today, the Smithsonian-affiliated **Birthplace of Country Music Museum** preserves that history, while September's **Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion** festival draws international fans. For a more modern spin, the **Hard Rock Hotel & Casino** has a year-round roster of live performances.





Mississippi

Raised on Blues

Continue heading south into Mississippi's Delta country, where cotton fields and juke joints gave birth to the blues. This is sacred ground for music lovers—the place where **Delta Blues** pioneers like Charley Patton and Skip James gave voice to what would become the foundation of modern American music.

Clarksdale's Ground Zero Blues Club (co-owned by actor Morgan Freeman) and **Red's** juke joint know how to keep the toes tapping. Named after Cornelius Orlando "Big Red" Paden, it's a mainstay that has hosted a long list of artists over the years. The **Delta Blues Museum** features exhibits that explore the people and events that propelled the blues mainstream.

For a truly unique experience, book a renovated shotgun shack at the nearby **Shack Up Inn**, which bills itself as the world's oldest B&B—*bed and beer*—and regularly hosts singer-songwriter workshops. You'll find a few modern conveniences—indoor bathrooms, heating and air conditioning, and a coffee maker—but it's built for traveling musicians, playfully proclaiming: "the Ritz we ain't."

When you're ready to get back on the road, another must-see is the **GRAMMY Museum Mississippi** in **Cleveland**, which celebrates the history and cultural significance of music worldwide while paying homage to Mississippi's influence on the industry. In **Indianola**, the **B.B. King Museum** honours the blues icon's legacy, while **Club Ebony** hosts live performances that would make the legend proud.

Continue following the Mississippi Blues Trail markers east to **Tupelo**, where a young Elvis Presley spent his formative years. A mobile passport programme, "**All Shook Up**," guides visitors through Elvis-related sites—from his modest two-room birthplace to the hardware store where his mother bought his first guitar.

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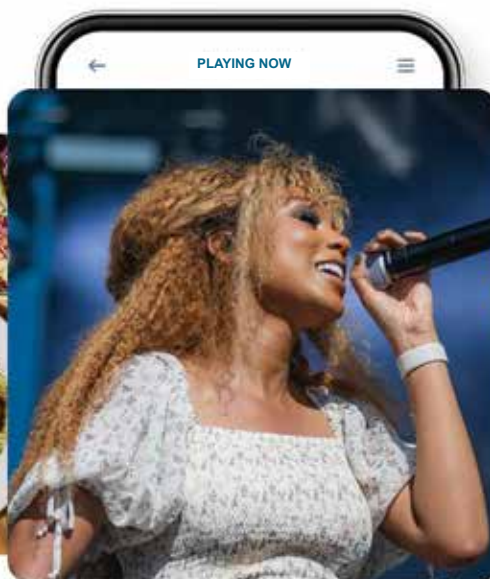
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Louisiana

Brass Bands and Bayou Beats

Continue west into Louisiana, where music isn't just entertainment—it's a way of life. **New Orleans** earned its title the "Birthplace of Jazz" through the cultural melting pot of **Congo Square** and the innovation of legends such as Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. Today, that creative spirit lives on, from the intimate acoustics and wooden floors of **Preservation Hall** to the spirited **French Quarter second lines** that celebrate everything from weddings to funerals.

But Louisiana's musical landscape extends far beyond the Big Easy. In **Lafayette**, the heart of Cajun country, venues such as the **Blue Moon Saloon** celebrate zydeco and Cajun traditions with festivals like April's **Festival International de Louisiane** and October's **Festivals Acadiens et Créoles**. Don't miss restaurant and music venue **Buck and Johnny's** in **Breaux Bridge**, where you can start the day with a zydeco breakfast (Saturdays only) and dance until the stars come out.

Further west, **Lake Charles** brings the beats at the lively **Panorama Music House**, while **Shreveport's Municipal Auditorium**—considered the finest example of Art Deco in Louisiana—has hosted everyone from GRAMMY winners to tribute acts. Its famed **Louisiana Hayride** broadcasts (1948–1960) launched countless careers, including Elvis Presley and Hank Williams, and the venue's tradition of spotlighting new talent continues today.



Festival Acadiens et Creoles, Lafayette



Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, Sheffield



Alabama

The Shoals to the Sandbar

Cross into Alabama and step onto hallowed musical ground. The **Muscle Shoals** region, along the Tennessee River, is where legends like Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett laid down hits such as *I Never Loved a Man* and *Mustang Sally*. Both **FAME Recording Studios** and the restored **Muscle Shoals Sound Studio**—revived in part by a grant from Dr. Dre and Jimmy Iovine's Beats Electronics—offer behind-the-scenes tours that pull back the curtain on rich history that shaped the region's signature sound.

For something uniquely Alabama, don't miss **Huntsville's World's Longest-Running Cigar Box Guitar Music Festival**. This gloriously offbeat event blends GRAMMY-winning musicians with local talent, hands-on workshops, and the chance to build—and play—your own cigar box guitar. Best of all, it's free, with proceeds supporting music education in Madison County.

Another must-attend event, country megastar Morgan Wallen launched the "**Sand in My Boots**" festival in 2025 as the rebranded "Hangout Music Fest"—already dubbed "the Coachella of the South"—on the sugar-white beaches of **Gulf Shores**. Complete your tour with stops at **Montgomery's Hank Williams Museum** and his childhood home in nearby **Georgiana**, or visit **W.C. Handy's** home in **Florence**, which serves as a museum and library for the "Father of the Blues."



New Orleans, Louisiana

Preservation Hall

Discover Vibrant New Orleans

For over 300 years, New Orleans has welcomed the world with open arms. Spanish settlers, French colonists, African traditions, and Caribbean rhythms have all left their mark, creating a cultural blend you won't find anywhere else. Here, the sounds of jazz spill from every corner, and every meal tells a story.

Stay in our legendary hotels where famous writers found their muse and jazz legends took the stage. Wake up to the aroma of café au lait and warm beignets dusted with powdered sugar. Wander the **French Quarter's** wrought-iron balconies and hidden courtyards, then browse **Royal Street's** antique treasures and local art galleries. For those drawn to mystery, explore our above-ground cemeteries or visit a fortune teller who'll reveal what the cards hold.

French Quarter



BBQ Shrimp



Embrace The Rhythm of the City

Hop aboard a historic streetcar and roll beneath ancient live oaks while viewing grand mansions that have stood for centuries. Dive into our world-class museums, snap photos with the colourful floats at **Mardi Gras World**, or catch a Mississippi River sunset from an authentic riverboat.

When hunger calls, choose your adventure: savour flavour-rich Cajun gumbo passed down through generations, or try innovative fusion dishes that blend global flavours with local soul. Join the joyful chaos of a second line parade, where strangers become friends as they dance behind a brass band through the streets of the French Quarter. As evening falls, follow the music down **Frenchmen Street** to hear live jazz that moves your feet, then end your night with a carriage ride under the stars.

Whatever draws you here, New Orleans is ready to share her stories with you. Start writing your own chapter today.

Discover more at NewOrleans.com.



Café Du Monde



Georgia

Rap and Roots

Travel east into Georgia, where genres collide to ignite musical innovation. **Atlanta** is where hip-hop legends like Outkast redefined rap, and where venues such as **Tabernacle**—a converted church with gospel acoustics and rock-and-roll attitude—host top touring acts in a setting that's part sacred, part rebellious. The city's **ONE Musicfest**, which has featured headliners like Janet Jackson, Pharrell Williams, and Kendrick Lamar, draws more than 100,000 revellers each October in a celebration of diversity and Southern culture.

The state's musical heritage runs deep through its smaller cities, too. **Macon** celebrates its native sons Otis Redding, Little Richard, and the Allman Brothers with museums and annual festivals, while the college town of **Athens** birthed R.E.M., Widespread Panic, and the B-52s. Even today, the latter's historic **40 Watt Club** continues to draw up-and-coming punk and indie rock artists.

Georgia's festival calendar is stacked with headliners that turn the whole state into a stage. Each spring, the **Savannah Music Festival** spans genres from chamber to soul over 17 days, while the **Atlanta Jazz Festival** brings smooth sounds to **Piedmont Park** every Memorial Day weekend. For a taste of emerging regional acts, **AthFest** spotlights the best of Georgia's college music scene, while the **Rome River Jam** blends outdoor recreation with live performances along the Coosa River.



South Carolina

A Musical Mosaic in the Palmetto State

Continue down the coast to South Carolina, where musical traditions span the gamut from high culture to honky-tonk. Every May, **Spoletto Festival USA** transforms **Charleston** into a world-class arts destination, featuring opera, experimental music, and jazz performances in the town's magnificent historic venues. George Gershwin found inspiration for the American opera *Porgy and Bess* in the Holy City, and contemporary artists continue to push boundaries today.

The coast offers a different kind of musical experience. **Myrtle Beach** hosts the massive **Carolina Country Music Fest** and the **National Shag Dance Championships**, which celebrate South Carolina's official state dance with top performances and beach tunes. **North Charleston's Riverfront Revival** brings country headliners and local acts together each October for a festival that radiates family reunion vibes.

For a rootsier experience, head inland. The **Albino Skunk Music Festival in Greer** is a beloved grassroots gathering every spring and autumn, bringing together bluegrass, folk, and Americana fans for intimate concerts under the stars. And in **Columbia**, the city pays tribute to hometown favourites Hootie & the Blowfish, who got their start at the University of South Carolina, with a guitar pick-shaped monument commemorating their 25th anniversary.



MerleFest, Wilkesboro

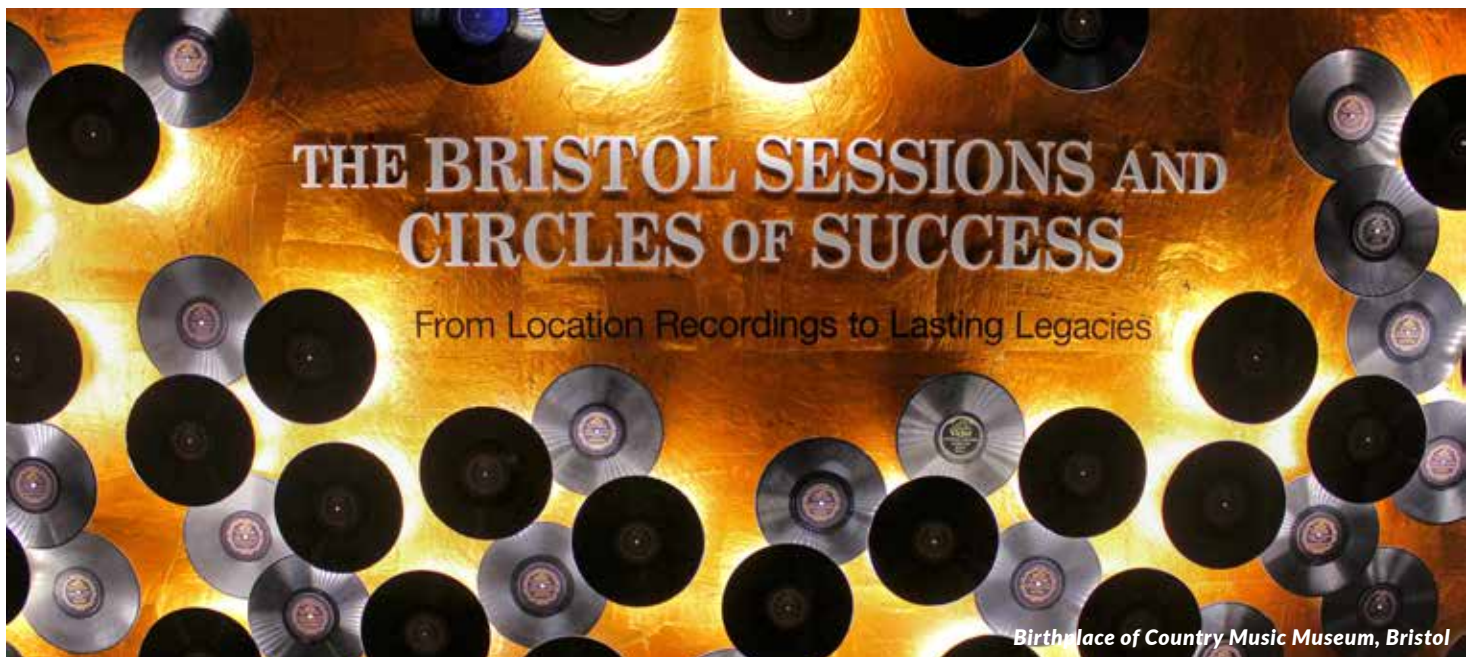
North Carolina

Mountain Sounds, City Rhythms

As you mosey into North Carolina, music trails wind through mountains and coastal plains. The state's crown jewel is **MerleFest** in **Wilkesboro**, a family-friendly celebration in April that's become one of America's premier folk festivals. Named for the late son of the legendary Doc Watson, it captures the spirit of traditional mountain music while embracing contemporary songwriters.

The Triangle—**Durham**, **Raleigh**, and **Chapel Hill**—boasts polished venues and cutting-edge acts, with **Raleigh** hosting the intimate **Dreamville Festival** (J. Cole's annual event) and **Durham's Carolina Theatre** presenting everything from indie rock to world music. **High Point's John Coltrane International Jazz & Blues Festival**, held every Labor Day weekend, honours the jazz giant's legacy with performances ranging from traditional to avant-garde. And the **Lovin' Life Music Fest** in **Charlotte** is just that, a love letter to the city through music. With more than 10 venues throughout the Queen City, there's everything from intimate theatres to mega auditoriums to catch a show, including the **Bojangles Coliseum**, notably where Elvis had his last live performance.

In the western part of the state, **Asheville** brims with creative energy—from weekly drum circles and buskers on street corners to venues like **The Orange Peel**, which hosts acclaimed touring acts.



Virginia

Where Every Mile Has a Melody

Cross into Virginia and follow **The Crooked Road**, a 333-mile driving trail linking dozens of mountain venues and festivals in the southwestern part of the state. Expect everything from blues and old-time string bands to a cappella gospel and centuries-old ballads. This unique route tells the story of how fiddle tunes from Scotland and Ireland evolved into a distinctly American sound.

At the heart of it all is **Bristol**, where the 1927 Bristol Sessions — country music's "big bang" — introduced the world to the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Their recordings, now preserved at the **Birthplace of Country Music Museum**, launched the genre we know today. The **Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace** offers more opportunities to learn about the region's musical history and catch live performances.

If you time your visit right, you can also catch a live show at the **Rex Theater** in **Galax**. Originally opened in 1940 as a movie palace, the Rex has since been renovated and now serves as a venue for concerts and the home of **Blue Ridge Backroads Live**, a weekly radio show featuring old-time and bluegrass bands broadcast live by local radio station Classic Country 98.1 FM.

FloydFest attracts an eclectic crowd with everything from klezmer to reggae, while the **Floyd Country Store** hosts legendary Friday night jams featuring traditional bluegrass music and clog dancing. In **Charlottesville**, revelers can grub on smoked meats, pizza and more while enjoying a show at **The Southern Café & Music Hall**. The **Carter Family Fold** in **Hinton**—where June Carter and Johnny Cash once performed together—continues the musical legacy of old-time country and bluegrass music every Saturday night, often featuring descendants of the original Carter Family.



West Virginia

Indie Acts and Appalachian Tracks

Wind north into West Virginia's mountains, where traditional music drifts from hollers to concert halls. In Charleston, **Mountain Stage**—one of America's longest-running live music radio shows—has been broadcasting since 1983, showcasing both legendary and emerging artists nationwide on National Public Radio.

The state's small-town, intimate venues pack outsized talent. The **Purple Fiddle** in **Thomas** attracts respected indie artists, while charming **Lewisburg** is home to one of the world's four **Carnegie Halls**. The **Mountain Music Festival** in **Fayetteville** adds adrenaline to the mix, combining whitewater rafting, camping, and live music at **ACE Adventure Resort** in the heart of the New River Gorge.



Mountain Stage, Charleston

Master Musicians Festival, Somerset



Kentucky

A Musical Mashup

Head west into Kentucky, where both bourbon and bluegrass flow freely. **Louisville** anchors the state's festival scene with heavy hitters like **Bourbon & Beyond** in September, featuring headliners such as Phish and Noah Kahan alongside craft spirits and gourmet food. For heavier sounds, **Louder Than Life** attracts metal acts like Slayer and Lamb of God. Meanwhile, the healing power of music takes centre stage at **Ashland's Healing Appalachia**, which raises funds for addiction recovery.

The **Master Musicians Festival** in **Somerset** has grown steadily over the last three decades, perfectly capturing the state's diversity by blending rock, jazz, Celtic, and roots music in a lively outdoor celebration. The state's quirkier festivals showcase Kentucky's personality: **London's World Chicken Festival** honours Colonel Sanders with three days of live music (and the world's largest stainless steel skillet), while **Lawrenceburg's Burgoo Festival** dishes out traditional stew alongside performances over a long weekend each October.



King Biscuit Blues Festival, Helena



Arkansas

Genre Hopping and Boundary Breaking

In Arkansas, musical traditions range from Delta blues to Ozark mountain sounds. The **King Biscuit Blues Festival** in **Helena** draws purists to the Mississippi River with a mix of classic, modern, Delta, and Chicago-style blues, while **Eureka Springs** hosts the **Ozark Folk Festival**—the longest continuously running annual folk festival in the U.S.—each autumn.

Modern festivals showcase the state's evolving sound. **FreshGrass** in **Bentonville** brings progressive bluegrass to **The Momentary's** museum grounds, while the genre-fluid **Valley of the Vapors Independent Music Festival** in **Hot Springs** spotlights underground and lesser-known artists from around the globe. In **Fort Smith**, the **Peacemaker Festival** blends country, rock, blues, and Americana along the Arkansas River, while veteran **MusicFest El Dorado** draws major acts to a small-town stage.



National Blues Museum, St. Louis



Missouri

Where Jazz Grew Up and Legends Play On

End your musical pilgrimage in Missouri, where **Kansas City's 18th & Vine Jazz District** keeps the swing era alive. The **American Jazz Museum** rightfully claims that while jazz was born in New Orleans, it grew up in Kansas City during Prohibition, when musicians flocked and where the party never stopped. That spirit still thrives at venues like **The Blue Room**, **Green Lady Lounge**, and the **Mutual Musicians Foundation**.

St. Louis offers its own musical personality through the **National Blues Museum** and standout venues like **The Pageant** and **Jazz St. Louis**. The city's Soulard neighbourhood thrums with after-hours energy at spots like **1860 Saloon** and **Blueberry Hill's Duck Room**, where Chuck Berry used to perform.

For a completely different experience, **Branson** delivers Vegas-meets-Ozarks entertainment with more theatre seats than New York's Broadway district. Dubbed the "Live Entertainment Capital of Missouri," shows span pop, rock, country, bluegrass, and gospel. Nearby, **Thunder Ridge Nature Arena**—an outdoor amphitheatre carved into the mountains overlooking Table Rock Lake—delivers a transcendental experience in nature.



Late-Night Listening: Where to Catch Music After Midnight

When the sun goes down, the South's music scene comes alive. These venues and traditions keep the party going long after most places have last call.

New Orleans sets the standard with Le Bon Temps Roule's late-night sets, Maple Leaf Bar's nightly shows, and Frenchmen Street's brass bands and jazz combos playing until dawn.

Kansas City's Mutual Musicians Foundation keeps a 1930s tradition alive with midnight jam sessions every Friday and Saturday, open to both artists and spectators.

Little Rock's White Water Tavern may have a humble stage, but its late-night gigs are legendary, spotlighting emerging talent in an intimate juke joint atmosphere.

St. Louis keeps the energy alive in Soulard, where 1860 Saloon, Game Room & Hardshell Café host after-hours sets from local and touring acts.



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