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A birthday celebration at the Grand Ole Opry took place in October.



# Grand Ole PARTY

After 90 years, the Grand Ole Opry is as vibrant and relevant as ever. Here's a look at what allows this institution to keep making the city—and its stars—famous.

BY MARGARET LITTMAN.





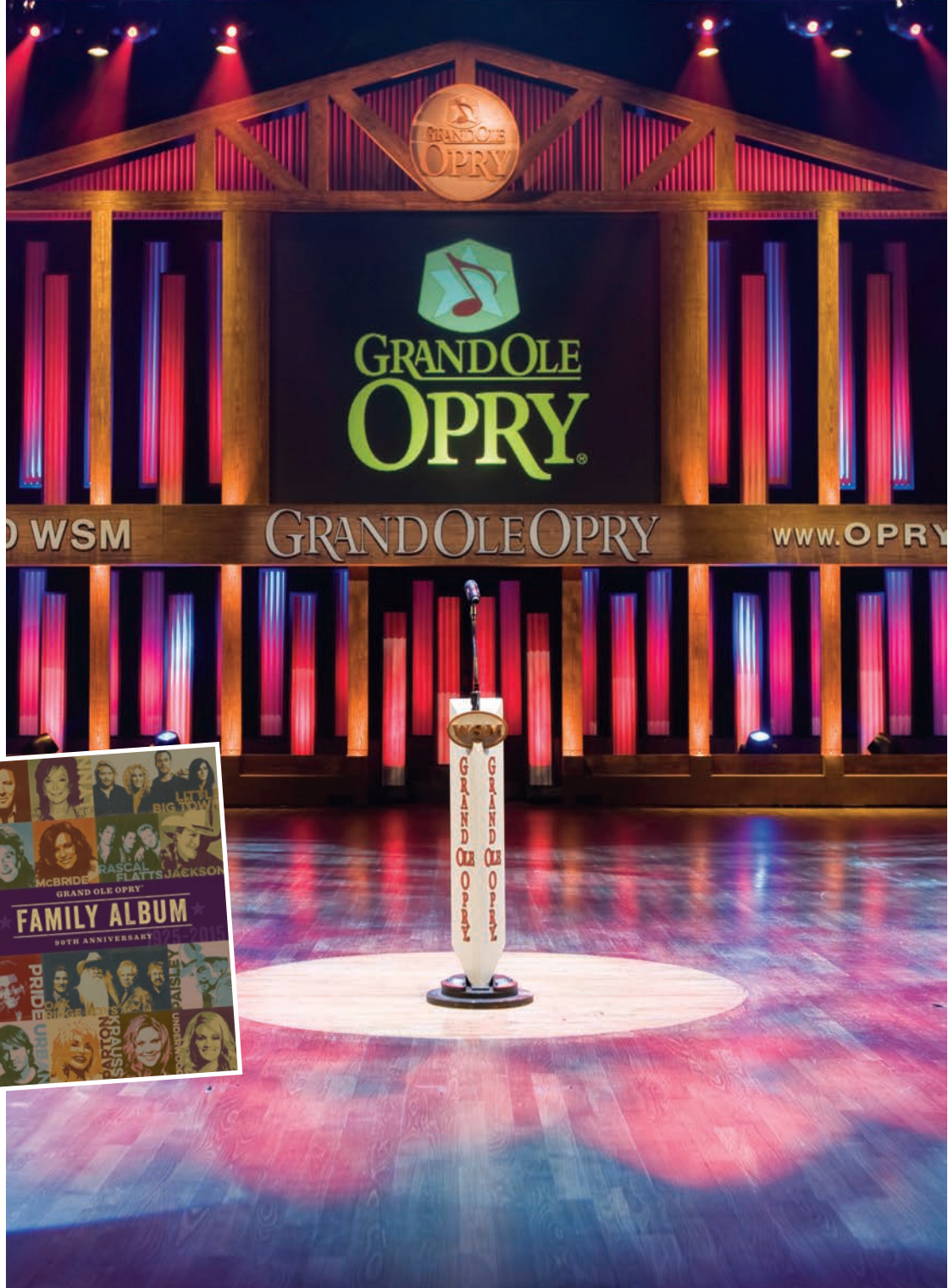
Like any 90-year-old, the Grand Ole Opry, which officially reaches that milestone on November 28, has witnessed a lot of change in its lifetime. Launched as the WSM Barn Dance that a fiddle player named Uncle Jimmy Thompson broadcast on the then-new WSM radio station, the Opry predates even the Great Depression.

The “show that made country music famous” has evolved from broadcasting locally to streaming to international audiences. Over the years, it has seen its artists’ music sold on gramophone records, vinyl records, 8-track and cassette tapes, CDs and DVDs, and vinyl again—not to mention downloaded and streamed through Napster, Spotify, and Pandora.

Throughout 2015, the Opry’s owner, Ryman Hospitality Properties, has feted the institution with special guest stars, a commemorative coffee table book, a two-part concert in New York City, and a series of new artist discovery CDs called *Opry 9.0*. Some might bemoan that RHP’s stewardship is too slick for what began as (and still is, to some degree) hillbilly music. Yes, RHP has profited from the Opry—the stock price has climbed 22 percent over the past year—but it has also preserved it.

Ninety years in, the Opry proves its relevance daily. The show can be heard online, though mobile apps, on satellite radio, and, of course, still at its original home, WSM-AM. It walks a fine line, satisfying old-timers and nostalgia fans while wooing those who never heard of that sacred wood circle until they watched Deacon Claybourne stand there on their TV screen.

But that wasn’t always the case. People often thought of Opry entertainers to be straight out of *Hee Haw* (another iconic RHP entertainment property), with hayseeds sprouting out of entertainers’ ears. In 1983, when *The New York Times* reported on the sale of the Opry from American General Corporation to current owner RHP (then Gaylord Broadcasting Co. and later Gaylord Entertainment Co.), the *Grey Lady* struggled to define the radio show’s cultural significance, saying only that “it still claims to attract the largest single listening audience in the world.”



*“The same values that presented this hillbilly music show in 1925 are still alive and well today. They’re timeless values of respecting the elders and celebrating family, diversity, and the freedoms we enjoy.” —Pete Fisher*

Pete Fisher, vice president and general manager of the Opry, thinks part of the institution’s ability to persevere is due to the fact that “the same values that presented this hillbilly music show in 1925 are still alive and well today. They’re timeless values of respecting the elders and celebrating family, diversity, and the freedoms we enjoy,” he says. “They might be interpreted in a different way as time goes on, but the core value is still

the same.”

That statement would likely get a standing ovation (the Opry is big on standing ovations for its performers as well as audience members celebrating milestones). But the secret to the Opry’s longevity and significance also lies in its format, the way in which it has been preserved and promoted, and its physical building and the performers who flock to it.

COURTESY OF THE OPRY, SUPPLIED



## Format Matters

What debuted as the half-hour WSM Barn Dance is now a tight two-hour formula. Each show is divided into four 30-minute sections with its own host and sponsor. On an average night, each section has four performers (including the host), balanced with legends, contemporary acts, comedy, and bluegrass.

New members are invited based on an undisclosed set of criteria and are typically surprised on stage by a musical mentor. Inductees must be living—the Opry doesn't do posthumous awards—in part because the honor requires that they make a certain number of appearances on the stage each year. (One exception: Dolly Parton became a member in 1969 but hasn't graced that hallowed circle in decades.) Currently, there are 63 members of the Opry; in its history, 211 individuals or groups have been recognized with membership.

And they do it for free. So when talent manager Gina Keltner reaches out to book artists, she's competing against paying gigs as well as rare—and valuable—days off. It boggles the mind to think of Keltner booking more than 2,400 artists last year (204 shows with approximately 12 artists each). But volume is one of the things that has allowed the Opry to stay relevant and attract new audiences—the legends bring in the old-timers, the contemporary artists attract the Millennials, and each camp is exposed to the other's stars. In fact, at one of the October birthday shows held to mark the 90th anniversary of WSM, a largely white-haired audience sang along to Little Big Town's "Girl Crush" more loudly and enthusiastically than they did for several of the more traditional acts.

Naysayers argue that today's bigger names (think Kelsea Ballerini and even Keith Urban) aren't country enough to play on the iconic stage. But there will always be critics: Until the 1950s or 1960s, according to historical accounts, acts were not permitted to have drums on the set—and some still bemoan their presence.

## Spinoffs and Synergies

In 2009, WSM began broadcasting Music City Roots, an Americana radio program that is both a tribute to the Opry and a modern reinterpretation; as the first new weekly live music show in more than four decades, it seemed like a perfect way to introduce the Opry traditions to neophytes. The show originated at the Loveless Barn and is now broadcast live from The Factory in Franklin on a variety of commercial and noncommercial radio stations.

And no mention of the Opry and its ability to expand its fan base is possible without a discussion

*"I think this building is as important to the Opry family as the house you grew up in is to you. It's where memories are made... It's where your dreams came true, where you see some of your best friends every time you walk in the door." —Dan Rogers*

of ABC's *Nashville*. The Opry is a character as much as a set for the hit TV show. The actors, most of whom are singers and songwriters in real life, are often booked at the Opry, and given that Opry Entertainment is a producer of the show, the corporate synergy makes sense. Critics complain that their TV stardom overshadows lower-profile artists who have toiled in the industry for years—but the show has educated younger viewers who otherwise might not have bothered to learn the history. Throughout its four seasons, characters like Rayna, Maddie, and Daphne have waxed poetic on the honor of standing in that six-foot hardwood circle.

"The aura of standing in that circle and knowing that Hank Sr. and Willie Nelson stood there, it connects you to that tradition," says Darius Rucker, who was inducted in 2012. "I don't think the Opry will ever be irrelevant because people don't want to get rid of those traditions."

The city's current surge in popularity has certainly helped the show as well.

"Before we can sell a ticket to the Grand Ole Opry, we have to sell a ticket to Nashville, Tennessee," says Fisher. "And that ticket is very easy to sell now."

## Redefining Family

While marketing might get people in the front door, backstage is about more than ticket sales. The Opry is a place for artists to play as much as it is

a place for them to gather. Part of that, says Dan Rogers, director of marketing and communication at the Opry, comes from the frequency of shows—think back to the sheer volume of artists that Keltner books.

"Friday, Saturdays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays [depending on the week], you are all together," Rogers says. "You have artists who don't need the paycheck for their Opry appearance but are here because it's a social outlet."

Rucker agrees, noting that part of the appeal of playing the Opry is socializing before taking the stage.

"When you are getting ready and warming up, you are just hanging out," he says.

On show nights, Keltner adds, most of the dressing room doors stay open.

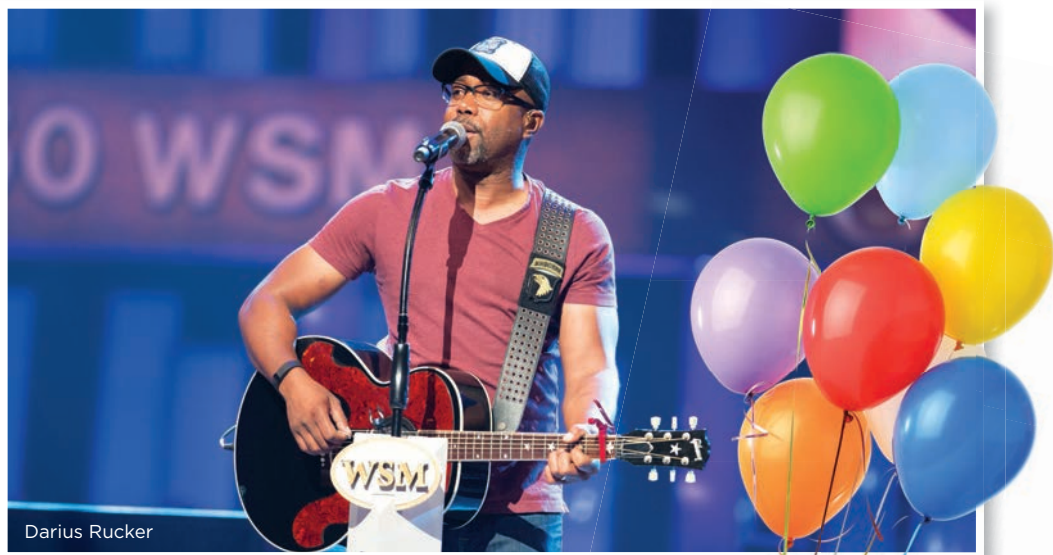
"You can just walk in and say hi and catch Vince Gill or whomever it may be preparing for his stuff," she says. "It is just kind of an open-door policy."

And that sense of family extends to the concert hall itself.

"I think this building is as important to the Opry family as the house you grew up in is to you," says Rogers. "It's where memories are made. It's where music is made, in this case. It's where your dreams came true, where you see some of your best friends every time you walk in the door."

The 4,400-seat Grand Ole Opry House is the Opry's sixth permanent home (see "Home Sweet Home" sidebar) and the first built specifically for the institution. It was added to the National Register for Historic Places this year, thanks in part to its revered hardwood circle, which was cut and imported from its last home, the Ryman.

"It's unpretentious, it's accessible, it's not about one artist," Fisher says. "The Grand Ole Opry is the star of the show, and every artist who performs here knows that they're one ingredient in the soup." >>>



Darius Rucker

# Home Sweet Home

Officially, the Opry has had six homes:



1

**1925 to 1934**

National Life & Accident Insurance Co.

2

**1934 to 1936**

Hillsboro Theatre (now the Belcourt Theatre)

3

**1936 to 1939**

Dixie Tabernacle (then on Fatherland Street)

4

**1939 to 1943**

War Memorial Auditorium

5

**1943 to 1974**

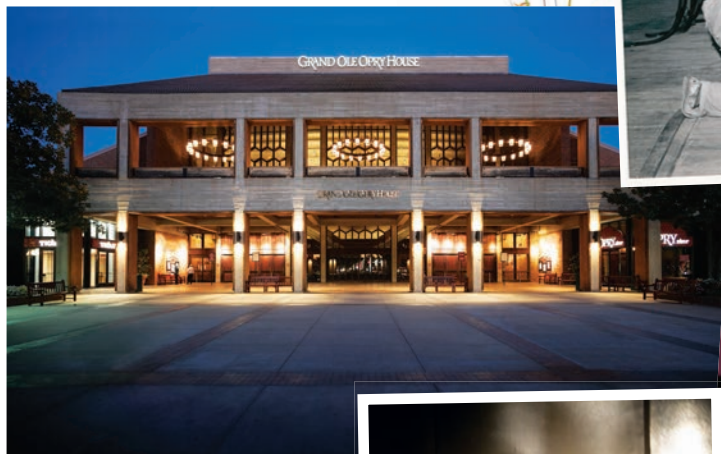
(and into the present during the winter holiday season)

Ryman Auditorium

6

**1974 to present**

Grand Ole Opry House



But a number of other venues have put a temporary roof over the Opry's head, particularly while the Opry House was being rebuilt after the flood. **Nashville Municipal Auditorium** hosted the Opry in both 1974 and 2010, and **Lipscomb University's Allen Arena** and **Two Rivers Baptist Church** opened their doors to the show in 2010. The Opry has also gone on the road, broadcasting across the globe.



## An Opry Timeline

**1925**

The WSM Barn Dance airs for the first time.

**1927**

The WSM Barn Dance becomes the Grand Ole Opry.

**1930s**

The Opry begins charging



admission. The cost? Twenty-five cents.

**1939**

The Opry goes national on NBC Radio.

**1940s**

The Opry takes the show on the road, traveling to New York and then Europe, led by Ernest Tubb.

**1968**

Concerns about violence after Martin Luther King's assassination

leads the Opry to cancel a show for the first time in its history.



**1972**

Opryland USA theme park opens.

**1972**

The first Fan Fair—now CMA Fest—hits the streets.

**1974**

The Opry moves from Ryman Auditorium to the Grand Ole Opry House.



**1983**

The Opry is sold to Gaylord Broadcasting Co.

**1994**

Ryman Auditorium reopens.



# The Roaring '90s

The Opry isn't the only nonagenarian in town—1925 was a banner year in Nashville. Here's a look at three other institutions celebrating their 90th birthdays.

>> Then called the **HILLSBORO THEATRE**, what we now know as the Belcourt Theatre originally opened to screen silent movies. At the time, it was Nashville's largest stage. The Hillsboro Theatre also served as the home of the Opry from 1934 to 1936.

>> **WSM** (now 650-AM) aired its first broadcast on October 5, 1925, paving the airways to launch the Opry just two months later.

>> Today, **WAR MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM** is a downtown venue for the likes of Modest Mouse and Moon Taxi—but this granite and marble edifice was designed to honor the service of those who died in World War I. And because all Nashville roads lead to the Opry, War Memorial was the home of the Opry from 1939 to 1943.

**1997**  
Opryland USA closes.

Music City), but the show goes on.

**2010**  
The flood shuttered the Opry House (and much of

**2015**  
The Grand Ole Opry House is added to the National Register of Historic Places and celebrates its 90th anniversary. >>>



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# In Their Words



**GINA KELTNER,**  
Talent Manager

**Year hired:** 1999

**Favorite Opry moment:** Dolly Parton singing “I Will Always Love You” to Porter Wagoner on his 50th Opry anniversary in 2007. “He could hardly look her in the eye. He was so emotional that she was there. You could’ve heard a pin drop.” In hindsight, it is all the more poignant, as it was the last time the pair appeared on stage together. Wagoner passed away later that year.

**The power of social media:**

A few years ago, Loretta Lynn had to cancel a Friday night appearance due to illness, putting Keltner’s team into overdrive. “That was huge. We know a lot of our audience is coming to see Loretta, and who can replace Loretta?” she says. “We were scrambling and searching artists’ schedules and calling agents, and one of our staffers just happened to notice that Martina McBride tweeted that she was home doing laundry. So we put in a call to Ms. Martina, and she said, ‘Sure, I’ll be happy to do that for Loretta.’ So she came in to fill in at the last minute.”



**JACOBI CALLOWAY,** Usher

**Year hired:** 2014

**Favorite Opry moment:** Even though he had seen Brad Paisley perform before, Calloway says he was blown away when he saw The Pais play an acoustic set on the hallowed stage.

**Making the grade:** Calloway first attended the Opry as part of a



school assignment. “We had to go to a venue that we hadn’t been to before and watch a show or a concert and do a report about it,” says the 18-year-old. “I’d never been to an Opry show. I really like country music and I wanted to be a part of it, and after I went to that show I wanted to go see another show and it was sold out.” Calloway’s grandmother suggested applying to work at the storied radio show. He was hired two months after he applied and was floored when vice president and general manager Pete Fisher addressed him by name in the middle of a shift. From his first day on the job, he says, “it really felt like home. Everybody was nice. I wasn’t expecting it to feel so much like family.”



**DEBBIE BALLENTINE,**  
Executive Director  
of Operations

**Year hired:** 1973

**Favorite Opry moment:** The night Trace Adkins was invited to be an Opry member. “Trace is 6’7” or 6’11”—a very tall person—[and] Little Jimmy was 4’11”, so [Dickens] did this thing where he had this little stepstool, and he stepped up on the stepstool so that he could be nearer Trace’s height to invite him.” Adkins was so overcome that he put his head on Little Jimmy’s shoulder. Ballentine says she thought to herself, “Okay. This is clear. This is not rehearsed. This is about the relationship.”

**Other favorite Opry moment:** The Opry heard about a teen in Austin, Texas, with Down Syndrome whose dream was to be a ticket taker. His dad, a singer-songwriter, was invited to play, and the boy was invited to usher. “He had practiced and practiced to be ready to say, ‘Welcome to the Grand Ole Opry,’ to guests that were coming in that night,” Ballentine says, tearing up as she recalls the story. “Guests could tell this was special. The dad introduced him from the stage and said, I know some of you got to

meet him on your way in; this was his dream. His dream has been fulfilled tonight.’ He was immediately given a standing ovation.”



**CARTER JONES,**  
Tour Guide

**Year hired:** 2013

**Favorite backstage moment:** “Within about two weeks of working here, I had this little boy on a tour

COURTESY OF THE OPRY



and he had a Darius Rucker tee shirt on, a Brad Paisley backstage pass, and a baseball cap. It reminded me of me when I was little. He was off to the side of the stage and I could see he started crying, and I went over to him and I put my arm around him and I said, 'Oh, what's up, buddy?' He said, 'I've been wanting to come here since I was a little kid.' His parents said, 'He's been bugging us since he was four years old to come see the Opry.'"

**Why the Opry formula works:** Jones thinks it is "artful" how the Opry attracts new audiences. "They have a segment host and then they have the people who the segment host introduces. For example, Connie Smith might be on a segment and she may introduce Carrie Underwood. So the people who are coming to see Carrie Underwood that are my age will also be introduced to Connie Smith and then they can say, 'Oh, wow, that was Carrie before Carrie was Carrie.'"



**ELOISE RUSSO, Usher**

**Year hired:** 1987

**Favorite Opry moment:** Seeing all the employees come together to help rebuild after the 2010 flood.

**Reason not to retire:** Russo ushers at the Opry most weekends, with a frequency her friends and family may not understand. But the 91-year-old, who worked nights when Johnny Cash graced the stage, has no intention of cutting back on her shifts. "It's such a wonderful feeling working at the Opry—when the guests arrive, you're able to help them in their seating, assist them with any problems they have, and then when they're leaving at night, you're standing right there in the back and you tell them 'good night' and ask, 'Did you have a good time?' And you see the smile on their face. You come home, you know you not only have enjoyed the show yourself, but you have been a big help to the guest that has taken the time and their money to come to the Grand Ole Opry."

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