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# Driving the 'American music triangle': Small towns, juke joints, honky-tonks and dance halls

John Huxley | Mar 5 2016 at 12:15 AM

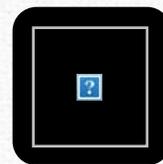
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The Hank Williams statue in Montgomery. Photo: Alamy

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SHARE **John Huxley takes a road trip exploring the roots of the Deep South's music traditions.**

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It's late morning when we slip across the Mississippi border into Alabama, after a couple of hours lazily cruising through typical Deep South landscape, much of it lined with earthy red fields of fluffy cotton and of tobacco.

Here and there, the monotony is broken by tiny townships. Some are opulent, some tumbleweed poor, littered with abandoned shops, skeletal clapperboard houses, clapped-out trucks. But all seem proud of their dazzling white church.

Each has a signboard message for passing traffic. "Have you made God smile today?" one inquires. "Like it or not Jesus is coming back," warns another.

Even our "classic American breakfast", which includes signature southern dishes such as grits, fried alligator balls and chocolate gravy, is eaten at a typical roadside diner with a religious message of sorts.

"There's a place for all God's children..." it reads, "... right next to the potatoes and gravy."

It all looks, sounds and tastes like something from the old Simon and Garfunkel road-trip song, *America*, or the Rascal Flatts hit *Life is a Highway*, which suddenly comes up on local radio station Shoals Country WLAY 103.5.

Within minutes we are in Muscle Shoals, named after the local mussels, and/or the strong American Indians, who navigated the nearby Tennessee River's thunderous stretch of shallow rapids.

It may be just a dot on the GPS road map, but for more than half a century the town has been a place of pilgrimage for wannabe music makers, who come from all over the world to lay down tracks in one of its four recording studios.

They include Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, the Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, Willie Nelson, Cher, Simon and Garfunkel, says local guitarist Travis Wammack, who cut his first record at 11, had a big hit at 17 with a song called *Scratchy*, and at 69 is still recording music.

No wonder local cars carry stickers reading, "Either you rock or you suck". No wonder that hereabouts the mighty Mississippi has been dubbed "The Singing River". Or that The Shoals, and its Hall of Fame, have become a magnet for music lovers everywhere.

The Shoals city is just one stop on a magical, 10-day musical tour through the American Deep South, a destination made more accessible in recent years by the non-stop Qantas flight from Sydney to Dallas-Fort Worth.

At anything up to 17 hours, the flight is currently the world's longest, but it offers a wide gateway to the southern states of Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana and "sweet-home" Alabama.

The region is far-flung, full of huggable, genuinely hospitable people; an eclectic, culinary mix from Cajun to Chinese, from po'-boy (poor boy) sandwiches to gumbo and jambalaya; wonderful *Gone with the*

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*Wind* architecture; a fascinating, though sometimes bloody, Civil War and civil rights history. And, of course, its music.

For this, we are reminded everywhere, is the birthplace of blues, jazz, country and western, soul, gospel, Southern gospel, cajun/zydeco and bluegrass. It is "where history made music ... then music made history".

This can be explored by driving the "Americana Music Triangle", a road trip covering 2400 kilometres, nine musical genres and thousands of stories. It's an adventure linking New Orleans, Memphis and Nashville "and all the small towns, juke joints, honky-tonks and dance halls in between".

More pressed for time, perhaps, than the average holiday-maker or music pilgrim, our group of four women and one man (me), travels by 12-seater bus, driven by Jason from South Carolina.

He is a great driver, dancer and source of local info, on subjects ranging from the proper dismemberment of crabs in a Lake Charles restaurant, to the passionate "Roll Tide Roll" chant of fervent University of Alabama football fans.

By the end of the trip he will have learned to "speak Australian", admitting he's a (red-haired) "ranger", responding to cries of "Jaayyyyson" and occasionally "throwing U-ies".

Appropriately, the first stop on our musical tour, devised by Travel South USA, is self-styled Music City, Nashville, where there is just so much to see, do, eat, listen to and look.

Most of the live action is out on the streets, on Broadway and The Gulch, in honky-tonks such as Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, Robert's Western World, Wild Horse Saloon and Layla's Bluegrass Inn.

But before that, there is a Johnny Cash Museum, a Willie Nelson and Friends Museum and the must-visit Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Like most American "attractions" it is bright, imaginative, proudly patriotic, offering a rich, interactive experience where visitors are "immersed in the history and sounds of country music, its origins and traditions".

A whole day can be profitably spent watching vintage black-and-white film, admiring the colourful clothes of the crooners, inspecting their outrageously exotic cars, some decorated with guns, and simply playing their music.

Nearby is the historic RCA Studio B, self-styled "home of 1000 hits", sung by musical giants such as Jim Reeves, Charlie Pride, Roy Orbison, Dolly Parton and Elvis Presley, who was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, and died in nearby Memphis.

"Sit down and close your eyes," says our guide Nita, as we enter the room where "The King" cut one of his most famous hits, *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*.

In silence, she snaps on a tape. After several false starts, between which Elvis laughs and joshes with the band, the song comes eerily, perfectly, powerfully, to life again. It is surprisingly moving.



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A short walk away is the Gothic revival-style Ryman Auditorium. The so-called "soul of Nashville" was built as a tabernacle in the 1890s by a born-again businessman and steamboat captain, Thomas G. Ryman.

Subsequently saved from developers by a feisty widow who went by the gender-neutral name of L.C. Naff, the hall staged concerts, boxing matches and shows by the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Harry Houdini and Mae West.

Its history is described in part by "local" Australian actress Nicole Kidman, whose Nashville-centric husband Keith Urban first headlined a show at the Ryman in 2004.

If the 2400 audiences at the Ryman are slightly, rightly referential, the 4400 country music fans at the Grand Ole Opry (a local corruption of "opera"), where we go that night, are almost riotous.

They scream, chant, jump up and down to pose for selfies, shuttle back and forth for food, wave US and Tennessee flags. As the local guide explains, only the 90-year-old Opry, which is broadcast live on country radio, "makes fans feel like family".

There is huge applause for Larry Gatlin's musical "letter to the bad guys", and for the knockabout geriatrics, *Riders in the Sky*. "Never take a laxative with a sleeping tablet... though you will sleep like a baby," a rider warns.

Sounds cheesy? Well, it is, even down to the advertisements for everything from Durango Boots to roadside cafes and licences to fish the Cumberland River for big and small-mouthed bass. But it is great fun.

The next day we move on south, across the Alabama border, the music of Mississippi still rocking the bus. To The Shoals, where they are still cleaning up after a recent tornado. Then, onwards, southwards again, to Birmingham.

The city is better known, perhaps, for its fine dining and civil rights history than its music-making. But we are greeted with huge smiles, songs and swaying bodies in the 16th Street Baptist Church, where in 1963 four young girls were killed by a white extremist's bomb.

Then it's on to Montgomery, the state capital, again known better, probably, for its architecture, broad highways and prominent role as the capital of the Confederacy, at the start of the American Civil War in 1861 and during the civil rights movement a century later.

However, the legendary country music singer Hiram King "Hank" Williams is honoured by statue, memorial and a fascinating museum, showcasing his short but productive career, his cars, his guitars and his funeral.

Sadly, Williams – known among other things as "The Hillbilly Shakespeare" – reportedly died in the back seat of his sky-blue Cadillac on the morning of New Year's Day, 1953.

Even by the standards of lonesome cowboy musicians, his was a tragic life marked by divorce, pain, drugs and alcohol abuse, as well as memorable music. He was just 29.



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And so, after a day stop to explore the colourful history, delicious seafood, the wildlife and gorgeous, delta sunsets, in and about Mobile on the Gulf Coast, we arrive in New Orleans.

Music is as much a part of the daily life of this vibrant city as Mardi Gras, marching bands, monstrous weather and amazingly liberal "drink, dance and walk" licensing laws.

As co-author of the useful *French Quarter Drinking Companion* Elizabeth Pearce says, music is a key ingredient of the authentic Bourbon Street experience. Like the cocktail lists, the choices are long.

New Orleans, she explains, has one of the best live music scenes in the world, and nothing goes with music like booze. And vice versa.

"There's a real range of musical styles, including '60s cover bands, rhythm and blues, traditional jazz, indie rock, zydeco and everything in between.

"In most places drinking, talking and the music all co-exist peacefully. So don't expect your fellow audience members to sit in respectful silence. In New Orleans, listening is an active verb."

Try Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop for rowdy, singalong piano playing. Napoleon House for non-stop opera and classical music. Cat's Meow to join in a singalong session. Famous Door to hear '80s cover bands, Funky 544 for hip-hop. And so on, into the wee small hours and beyond.

But whatever you do, wherever you go, don't miss out on live jazz at the truly iconic Preservation Hall, an authentic, no-frills, hole-in-the-wall venue where the audience stands or sits on bare benches or, as we did, on the bare floor.

A limited number of tickets, a few for "big shot" seats with better views, are available each night, but most music pilgrims are prepared to queue for one of three nightly gigs by some of the 100 or so master jazz practitioners.

As the brochure states, "on any given night audiences bear joyful witness to the evolution of this venerable and living musical tradition", that from Nashville through The Shoals to New Orleans helps define the Deep South.

## TRIP NOTES

### MORE INFORMATION

[travelsouthusa.com](http://travelsouthusa.com)

**GETTING THERE** Non-stop by Qantas from Sydney to Dallas-Fort Worth and on to Nashville by code-share partner American Airlines.

**STAYING THERE** The Deep South offers a wide range of hotels, motels and homestays, ranging in price from US \$25 to US \$500 a night. Included in the author's itinerary were two-night stops in Sheraton Music City in Nashville and Le Meridien in New Orleans.

*The writer was a guest of Travel South USA and Qantas*

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