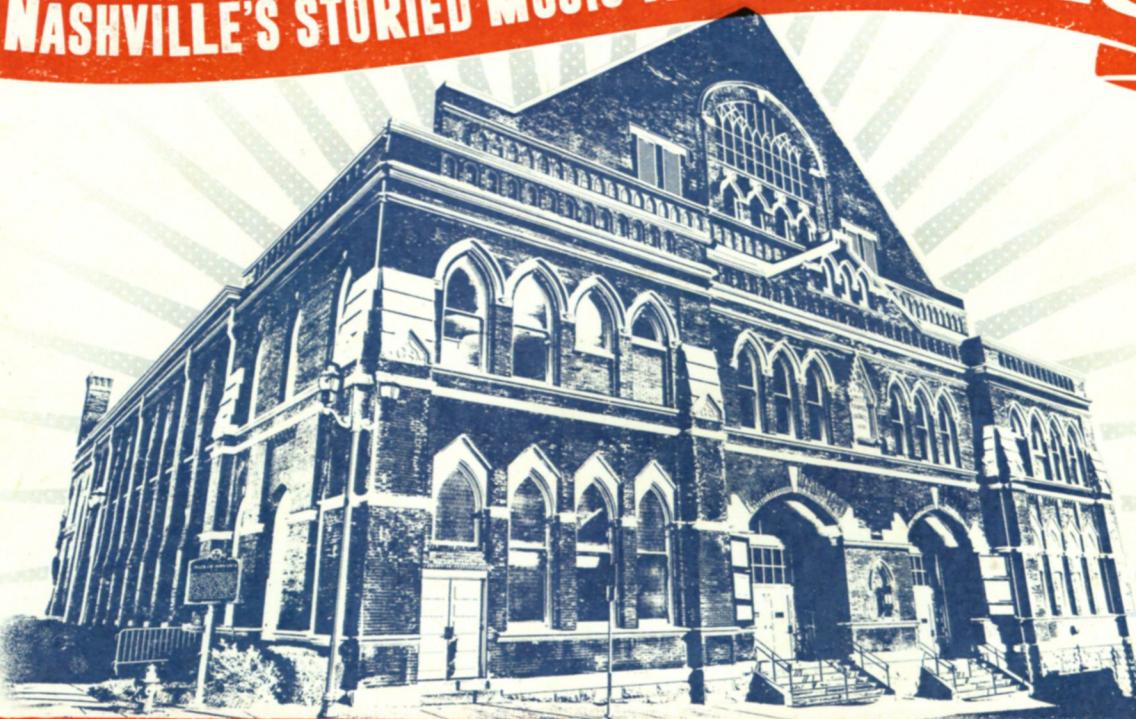


# THE RISE OF THE RYMAN

NASHVILLE'S STORIED MUSIC VENUE TURNS **125**



THE RYMAN AUDITORIUM STARTED AS A CHURCH AND HOUSED THE GRAND OLE OPRY BEFORE FALLING INTO DISREPAIR—AND THEN WAS REBORN—THE WOMEN WHO RAN THE HISTORIC SPACE LOOK BACK ON ITS STUNNING, HARD-WON REVIVAL.

BY SARAH GRANT





Patsy Cline



Mother Maybelle, Carter Sisters

# IN

1974, the Grand Ole Opry, a live country music radio show responsible for featuring legends such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn, ended its 31-year run at the Ryman Auditorium. The Opry's departure threw the beloved venue known as the Mother Church of Country Music into uncertainty. But after years of neglect, singer-songwriter-musician Emmylou Harris chose the space in 1991 to record *At the Ryman*, her landmark live American folk album, which would go on to win a Grammy Award.

A year later, Opryland owner Gaylord Entertainment (now known as Ryman Hospitality Properties) unveiled a new initiative to renovate and restore the Ryman to the world-class music venue it once was and is again today.

"There really is a vibe in that place," says Harris. "It's all made of wood, and it has no corners. Someone has said it's like being in a big guitar."

As the Ryman Auditorium just celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2017, Harris, singer-songwriter Patty Griffin, who recorded live at the Ryman early in the restoration process, former general manager Pam Matthews and Sally Williams, manager of the Ryman since 2013 and general manager of the Grand Ole Opry, reflect on the Ryman's history and why its performers still define the Nashville sound.



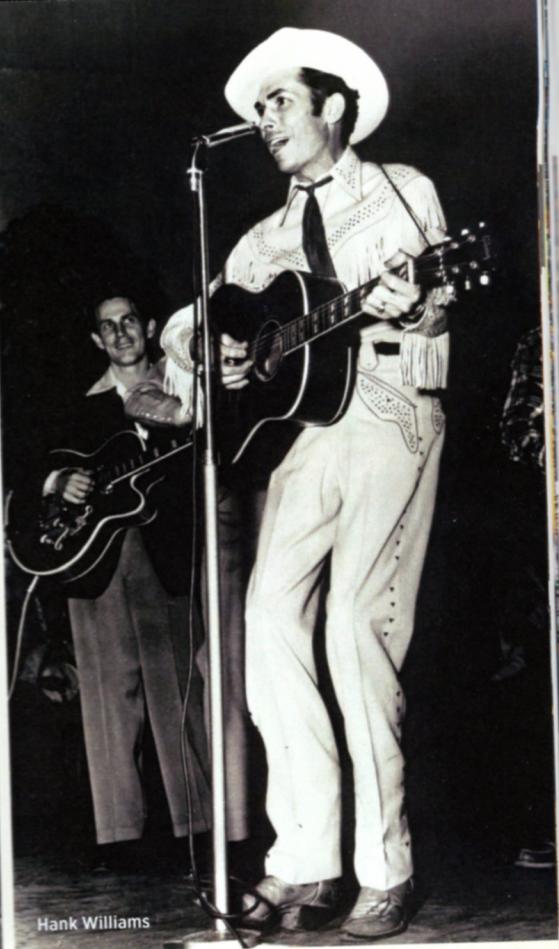
**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** It started [in 1892] as the Union Gospel Tabernacle church. Then it became what they

called the Carnegie Hall of the South. Teddy Roosevelt spoke there. Anna Pavlova danced there. Then, of course, it became the home of the Grand Ole Opry for many years before it just fell into disrepair. Anyone who's ever played the Ryman would tell you it's the most incredible venue, sonically. Of course, the seats are still very hard and uncomfortable, but that's part of it [*laughs*].

**PAM MATTHEWS:** I used to go see the Grand Ole Opry at the Ryman when I was a child. We'd go to the late show. I was in my jammies. I remember Dotie West's flaming red hair and sparkly jumpsuits. Thousands of paper church fans waved back and forth. Even the audience had movement. The King of Country Music, Roy Acuff once said there were so many paper fans waving in the audience, he'd have to look up to the ceiling just to keep time. Remember, Nashville in December can still be 80 degrees. And there



Crowd Outside Ryman



Hank Williams

was no air conditioning back then. Nashville is a society town, but these shows were the opposite. It was hillbilly. It was country.

**PATTY GRIFFIN:** The Opry was built on the music of really poor people in this country. And those are my people. That's where I come from. I learned to sing from my mother. That's what's really beautiful about the Ryman—the coming together of regular people in one place, to make that music that springs out of old, old traditions. That's what the Ryman signifies to me. It's famous because the people who made it famous come from really humble beginnings.

**PAM MATTHEWS:** Just the fact that she didn't get knocked down in all those years is amazing. The pews are original, the layout is original, it has a great sound. The original logo was a drawing of overlapping hands. There is still a streetlamp with that logo and in the center it says: "All Are Welcome."

**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** There's a certain camaraderie there when you do the Opry, because you don't get a sound check—you go out and do your two songs.

## DON'T FEEL SORRY FOR YOURSELF THAT YOUR STRING BROKE IN THE FIRST OR SECOND SONG. GET ON WITH IT.

**PATTY GRIFFIN:** It's one of those places where you're like, *I better not get inside my shit*. You try to be more present. Don't feel sorry for yourself that your string broke in the first or second song. Get on with it.

**SALLY WILLIAMS:** In 1892, when there was no stage or balcony, the ministers would preach from a center pulpit. And today, there is this sweet spot at the very front center of the stage where it's almost like you enter a vortex. It's like I walked through an invisible wall where my voice projects unlike it did half a foot behind me. Nobody planned that. We're not amplifying it.

**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** When we recorded *At the Ryman* live 25 years ago, we were thinking, *OK, if there's anything that we can't live with, we can fix it*. But when we got into putting the album together, everything bled in a way that everything was in everybody's mic. You couldn't fix anything [*laughs*]. It makes you step up to the plate and give it your best shot. Whatever that is, that's what you're going to get.

**PATTY GRIFFIN:** One of my favorite shows I got to be involved in was Marty Stuart and his wife Connie



Old Crow  
Medicine Show



Keith Urban



Darius Rucker



Jack White



Dolly Parton

Smith's Opry show. That was really majestic. They are from that world. The high level of musicianship and songwriting ability, combined with humility—it's just beautiful. It was me, Emmylou, Buddy Miller, Gillian Welch, David Rawlings. We also did a little trip across the alley to have a drink at Tootsie's or one of those bars where [country legends] would go get hammered and then go back up and do another song [*laughs*].

**PAM MATTHEWS:** Because it was a church, the building really is sanctified. Lovingly. I was married at the Ryman. That said, we got to today because we made money. People often think that the Ryman has always been this way, but it hasn't. The Ryman sat dormant for decades, and it lost money every year before I got there.

**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** When I first came to Nashville in the early '70s, I was kind of a refugee from New York. I had recently had a baby. New York had been exciting, but once I had a baby, it became a place that seemed dangerous

for some reason. So I thought, *Well, I know a couple of country songs*, and I moved down south. But there was no work for me. I ended up working as a waitress in a restaurant called Mahi Mahi. The Opry was moving out of the Ryman at that time.

**PATTY GRIFFIN:** I came to Nashville in the early-mid '90s. I found out much later about Emmylou's efforts to preserve the Ryman. I loved her already, but I love that she was part of preserving that tradition.

**PAM MATTHEWS:** It was 1985 when I moved to Nashville. Downtown was just strip clubs and peep shows. There would be no reason an upstanding young woman would be on lower Broadway. The Ryman had holes in the roof and pigeons living inside. It was nothing. Just an abandoned building in an abandoned part of town. The 1993 restoration of the Ryman happened when Nashville was revitalizing downtown. The Ryman opened in 1994, two years before the Bridgestone Arena. There was public outcry to keep

it alive, some of it from Opry people who were still living, like Minnie Pearl. But it was down to the studs. I don't even know if there was electricity.

**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** I'd done a record years ago with the idea of working up a bunch of songs, playing them live and that being the record. So I said, "Let's do that again." At that point, there weren't a lot of venues in Nashville the way there are now. A woman from my management, Bonnie Garner, said, "What about the Ryman?" There hadn't been live music there in years. So we got permission. At that time, the upstairs gallery was not considered structurally sound. So for three nights, we had 200 people a night on the floor.

All of a sudden people started paying attention to [the Ryman] again. It was set to be torn down. And before we knew it, Gaylord, which owns the Ryman, did a spectacular job of preserving the sanctity and the history of the building by renovating around it with dressing rooms, a gift



shop and so on. But they kept the actual Ryman intact. They honored the music that had taken place there, from the time it was a tabernacle and on through the years of the Opry.

**PAM MATTHEWS:** I started at the Ryman in November 2000, there were about 18 concerts that year—the year before, only 12. Artists and big tours were skipping Nashville completely.

In my office, I had a pink pad of paper that said, "Fear No Art." My job was to make the building make money. In 2001, we did the classics like George Jones, Alison Krauss, Mark Knopfler. But I was also booking Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Cedric the Entertainer, RatDog, Cake, the Doobie Brothers, Trans-Siberian Orchestra. And George Carlin. He was controversial. It was a shock to the system. I stood in the back and gasped a little bit.

**SALLY WILLIAMS:** All are welcome. People take ownership of that building. We hear about artists we

book who are head-scratchers for some people, but Nashville still has genres that are growing, genres that haven't flourished yet.

**PAM MATTHEWS:** I'd say that Coldplay performing in 2003 was a turning point. They played just before all the Grammy nominations came out in February. They were playing arenas, but we got on them early.

**PATTY GRIFFIN:** The night we recorded [live album *A Kiss in Time*, January 30, 2003] a light bulb exploded and a curtain caught on fire. I was standing side stage. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear Julie [Miller] say, "I don't know if anyone cares or not but the curtain's on fire" [laughs].

**SALLY WILLIAMS:** We worked assertively to increase the number [of concerts]. We rallied around getting people to stay in that building. We had Mumford & Sons for three nights in a row. This was right when they were

taking hold of the world. Old Crow Medicine Show, who play our New Year's Eve show every year, did the same thing. They were very important for the Ryman. I will never forget at the end of the third night of their residency, they did something that happens fairly frequently. Artists will stand at the edge of the stage and play completely unplugged in a straight line across the front, just as artists did 125 years ago. That night you had max capacity of 2,362 people singing in absolute harmony. It was magical.

**EMMYLOU HARRIS:** Nashville is still a place for the songwriter. It all starts with the song. And I think... that guitar pull, where people sing around songwriters, sharing songs, that was born here in Nashville. It's a place where people actually come to listen and hear the stories. It's like sitting in a living room. You have that wonderful intimacy of the song being born and just wondering where it's going to go. •