

# A Musical Tour of America

JOHN EDWARD HASSE, PHD

CURATOR OF AMERICAN MUSIC, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

*There are dozens of ways to organize a visit to the United States—you can tour its major cities, hike the national parks, or sightsee the famous monuments. In this essay, Dr. John Hasse suggests a more unique way: explore America by touring its many and varied musical shrines which can be found in every region of the country.*

Even people who have never visited the United States are familiar with its music. During its nearly 230 years as a nation, this country has developed an enormous amount of original music that is astonishing in its variety, vitality, creativity, and artistic accomplishment. Running the gamut from the humblest banjo tunes and down-home dances to the haunting blues of Robert Johnson and the brilliant jazz cadenzas of Charlie Parker, American music is one of the most important contributions the United States has made to world culture.

Arguably, no nation in history has created such a wealth of vibrant and influential musical styles as has the United States. American music reflects the energy, diversity, spirit, and creativity of its people. You don't have to understand English to feel the power of Aretha Franklin, the plaintiveness of Hank Williams, the *joie de vivre* of Louis Armstrong, the directness of Johnny Cash, the virtuosity of Ella Fitzgerald, or the energy of Elvis Presley.

These musicians and their musical genres are available to people around the world via recordings, downloads, Internet radio, Voice of America broadcasts, and television and video. But to really appreciate and understand them, there is nothing like visiting the places where they were born, and where their musical creations evolved and are preserved.

This article offers visitors a unique tour of the United States by surveying music museums and shrines across the country. Other musical traditions brought here by more recent immigrants—such as salsa and mariachi—and other new U.S. styles, including grunge,

rap, and hip-hop, have yet to be associated with dedicated museums or historical landmarks. They are, though, easy to find in nightclubs and festivals, or by searching the World Wide Web. Nightclubs come and go at a dizzying pace, and new festivals pop up all the time, so the emphasis here is on those locations that are likely to be around in the years ahead.

**Jazz.** Jazz is the most consequential, influential, and innovative music to emerge from the United States, and New Orleans, Louisiana is widely known

as the birthplace of jazz. No city, except perhaps for New York City, has received more visiting jazz aficionados than New Orleans. In the wake of the devastating blow to the “Crescent City” by Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005, unfortunately, international jazz enthusiasts may need to remain alert to news reports concerning the rebuilding of New Orleans.

New Orleans residents and jazz devotees worldwide eagerly await the reopening

of the French Quarter and Preservation Hall [<http://www.preservationhall.com>], a bare-bones pair of wooden rooms that has served since 1961 as a shrine of sorts to the traditional New Orleans sound. Other New Orleans treasures that will be revived include the Louisiana State Museum's exhibition on jazz [<http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/site>], complete with the musical instruments of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and other early jazz masters, and the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park Visitor Center [<http://www.nps.gov/jazz>], which will once again offer self-guided walking tours and other information from its North Peters Street location.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Kansas City, Missouri was a



AP/WWP Photo by Jennifer Szymaszek  
Musical giant and Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis, performs on his trumpet.

hotbed of jazz—Count Basie, Charlie Parker, Mary Lou Williams, and other greats performed there. You can get a sense of the music by visiting the old jazz district around 18th and Vine Streets, where you'll find the American Jazz Museum [<http://www.americanjazzmuseum.com>] and the historic Gem Theater.

In New York City, jazz from all periods can be heard in the city's many historic nightclubs, including the Village Vanguard [<http://www.villagevanguard.net/frames.htm>], the Blue Note [<http://www.bluenote.net>], and Birdland [<http://www.birdlandjazz.com>]. Harlem's Apollo Theater [<http://www.apollotheater.com>] has seen many great jazz artists, as has Carnegie Hall [<http://www.carnegiehall.org>] located at 57th Street and 7th Avenue. The city's newest jazz shrine is Jazz at Lincoln Center [<http://www.jazzatlincolncenter.org>], a \$130-million facility, opened in October 2004, featuring a 1,200-seat concert hall, another 400-seat hall with breathtaking views overlooking Central Park, and a 140-seat nightclub, Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola.

In the Queens area of New York City stands the home of, to my mind, the most influential U.S. jazz musician, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong (1901-71). The Louis Armstrong House [<http://www.satchmo.net>] offers tours and a small gift shop.

**Ragtime.** This syncopated, quintessentially piano music is one of the roots of jazz. A small display of artifacts from Scott Joplin, "The King of Ragtime Writers," is at the State Fair Community College in Sedalia, Missouri—the town where Joplin composed his famous Maple Leaf Rag. Sedalia hosts the annual Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival. In much larger St. Louis, you can visit one of Joplin's homes, the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site [<http://www.mostateparks.com/scottjoplin.htm>].

**Blues.** The twelve-bar blues is arguably the only musical form created wholly in the United States; and the state of Mississippi is often considered the birthplace of the blues. Certainly the state produced many leading blues musicians, including Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King. Most came out of the broad floodplain known as the Mississippi Delta, which runs 200 miles along the Mississippi River from Memphis, Tennessee south to Vicksburg,



AP/WWP Photo by Amanda Bicknell  
Blues guitarist W.C. Clark enjoys performing.

Mississippi. This part of Mississippi boasts three modest blues museums: the Delta Blues Museum [<http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org>] in Clarksdale, the Blues & Legends Hall of Fame Museum [<http://www.bluesmuseum.org>] in Robinsonville, and the Highway 61 Blues Museum located [<http://www.highway61blues.com>] in Leland.

Highway 61 is a kind of blues highway, the road traveled by blues

musicians heading north to Memphis, Tennessee. In Memphis, there is a statue of W.C. Handy, composer of "St. Louis Blues" and "Memphis Blues," on famed Beale Street [<http://www.bealestreet.com>] as well as a B.B. King's Blues Club [<http://www.bbkingclubs.com>].

**Bluegrass Music.** Bluegrass music—syncopated string-band music from the rural hills and "hollers" (hollows or valleys) of the eastern U.S. Appalachian mountain range—has found a growing audience among city-dwellers. You can visit the International Bluegrass Music Museum [<http://www.bluegrass-museum.org>] in Owensboro, Kentucky and the smaller Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Hall of Fame [<http://www.beanblossom.com>] in Bean Blossom, Indiana. A newly-designated driving route, the Crooked Road: Virginia's Music Heritage Trail [<http://www.thecrookedroad.org/>], is a 250-mile route in scenic southwestern Virginia that connects such sites as the Ralph Stanley Museum, the Carter Family Fold, the Blue Ridge Music Center, and the Birthplace of Country Music Museum.

**Country Music.** Long the epicenter of country music, Nashville, Tennessee boasts the Grand Ole Opry [<http://www.opry.com>], home of the world's longest-running live radio broadcast, with performances highlighting the diversity of country music every Friday and Saturday night, and the impressive Country Music Hall of Fame [<http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com>].



AP/WWP Photo by John Russell  
Little Jimmy Dickens is a tradition at the Grand Ole Opry.

Its permanent exhibit, *Sing Me Back Home: A Journey Through Country Music*, draws from a rich collection of costumes, memorabilia, instruments, photographs, manuscripts, and other objects to tell the story of country music.

Nearby are Historic RCA Studio B, where Elvis Presley, Chet Atkins, and other stars recorded, and Hatch Show Print, one of the oldest letterpress print shops in America whose posters have featured many of country music's top performers. In Nashville, you can also see Ryman Auditorium [<http://www.ryman.com>], former home to the Grand Ole Opry, as well as many night spots, such as the Bluebird Café [<http://www.bluebirdcafe.com>], one of the nation's leading venues for up-and-coming songwriters. In Meridian, Mississippi, the Jimmie Rogers Museum [<http://www.jimmierodgers.com>] pays tribute to one of country music's founding figures.

**Rock, Rhythm & Blues, and Soul.** Rock 'n' roll music



AP/WWP Photo  
Elvis Presley performs in 1973.

shook up the nation and the world, and more than 50 years after emerging, it continues to fascinate and animate hundreds of millions of listeners around the globe. Memphis, Tennessee, is home to Elvis Presley's kitschy but interesting home known as Graceland [<http://www.elvis.com>], the Sun Studio [<http://www.sunstudio.com>] where Elvis made his first recordings (and many other famous musicians have subsequently recorded), the Stax Museum of American Soul [<http://www.staxmuseum.com>] which covers Stax, Hi, and Atlantic Records, and the Memphis and Muscle Shoals sounds.

The Memphis Rock and Soul Museum features a superb Smithsonian exhibition tying together the story of Memphis from the 1920s to the 1980s with blues, rock, and soul—from W. C. Handy through Elvis and Booker T. and the MGs [<http://www.memphisrocknsoul.org>].

Detroit, Michigan offers the Motown Historical Museum [<http://www.motownmuseum.com>] with memorabilia from the Supremes, Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin and other soul singers who recorded for Motown Records.

If you're a big Buddy Holly fan, you might trek to the Buddy

Holly Center [<http://www.buddyhollycenter.org>] in Lubbock, Texas.

The formidable Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame [<http://www.rockhall.com>] in Cleveland, Ohio fills a stunning building designed by renowned architect I.M. Pei with hundreds of rock and roll artifacts and audio-visual samples. In Seattle, Washington, The Experience Music Project in the Frank Gehry-designed building [<http://www.emplive.org>] is a unique, interactive museum, which focuses on popular music and rock.



AP/WWP Photo by Edward Stapel  
Emmylou Harris sings at the Newport Folk Festival.

**Folk Music.** Most nations have their own indigenous music—in Europe and the United States it is often categorized as “folk music.” Folk music is passed along from one person to the next via oral or aural tradition, i.e., it is taught by ear rather than through written music. Typically the origin of the songs and instrumentals is shrouded in mystery and many different variants (or versions) of each piece exist, honed through the ears, voices, fingers, and sensibilities of many different performers. The easiest way to find live folk music is at one of the many folk music festivals held throughout the United States. The biggest is the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival [<http://www.folklife.si.edu>] held every June and July on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The 40th annual festival will be held in 2006.

**Latino Music.** Of course, the United States is a “New World” country of immigrants and each new ethnic group that arrives brings its own musical traditions which, in turn, continue to inevitably change and evolve as they take root in their non-native soil. Hispanics now account for the largest minority group in the United States, and

they practice many musical traditions.

Played by ensembles of trumpet, violin, guitar, vihuela, and guitarrón, Mexican mariachi music can be heard in many venues in the American Southwest; the closest thing to a mariachi shrine is La Fonda de Los Camperos, a restaurant at 2501 Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, which in 1969 pioneered in creating mariachi dinner theater. Bandleader-violinist Nati Cano has been honored with the U.S. government's highest award in folk and traditional arts, and his idea of mariachi dinner theater has spread to Tucson, Arizona; Santa Fe, New Mexico; San Antonio, Texas; and other cities.

The vibrant dance music called salsa, which was brought to New York City by Cuban and Puerto Rican émigrés, can be heard and danced to in nightclubs of New York, Miami and other cosmopolitan cities. A museum exhibition called *¡Azúcar! The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, featuring the Queen of Salsa who spent the majority of her career in the United States, has been mounted at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. It will be on display through October 31, 2005. An on-line exhibition may be viewed at <http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/celiacruz/>.

**Cajun Music.** The Prairie Acadian Cultural Center in Eunice, Louisiana (about a three-hour drive west of



AP/WWP Photo by Reed Saxon  
The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is located in Cleveland, Ohio.

New Orleans) tells the story of the Acadian, or Cajun, peoples—who emigrated here after being evicted from Canada in the 1750s—and their distinctive Francophone music and culture [<http://www.nps.gov/jela/pphtml/facilities.html>].

The nearby Liberty Theater is home to a two-hour live radio program, *Rendez-vous des Cajuns*, featuring Cajun and zydeco bands, single musical acts, and Cajun humorists every

Saturday night. Eunice is also home to the Cajun Music Hall of Fame [<http://www.cajunfrenchmusic.org>], and the Louisiana State University at Eunice maintains a web site devoted to contemporary Creole, zydeco, and Cajun musicians [<http://www.nps.gov/jela/Prairieacadianculturalcenter.htm>].

**Show Tunes and Classical Music.** No tour of music in the United States would be complete without mentioning two other great offerings: show tunes and classical music. Although the latter originated in Europe, native composers such as Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein brought an exuberant American style to the classical genre. The Lincoln Center [<http://www.lincolncenter.org/index2.asp>] and historic Carnegie Hall in New York City [<http://www.carnegiehall.org/jsp/intro.jsp>] are the best-known venues for classical offerings, although excellent performances by some symphony orchestras can be found throughout the country [<http://www.fndaconcert.com/>].

For show tunes enthusiasts, Broadway is America's shrine to live theater. Broadway is the name of one of New York City's most famous streets. It also refers to the entire 12-block area around it known as "The Great White Way" of theater lights. In the United States revivals of Broadway musicals appear throughout the year at regional theaters.

**Musical Instruments.** New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art [[http://www.metmuseum.org/Works\\_of\\_Art/department.asp?dep=18](http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/department.asp?dep=18)] exhibits rare musical instruments as works of art. The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. displays rare decorated Stradivarius stringed instruments,



AP/WWP Photo by J.Pat Carter  
J. Paul Jr. of the Zydeco New Breed Band performs at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

pianos, harpsichords, and guitars, and has, as well, exhibits devoted to jazz legends Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington.

In Carlsbad, California—not far from San Diego — the Museum of Making Music [<http://www.museumofmakingmusic.org>] displays over 500 instruments and interactive audio and video samples. The Fender Museum of Music and Arts [<http://www.fendermuseum.com>] in the Los Angeles suburb of Corona, California has an exhibition on 50 years of Fender guitar history.

In the Great Plains town of Vermillion, South Dakota, the National Music Museum [<http://www.usd.edu/smm>] displays 750 musical instruments.

No matter where you go in the United States, you'll find Americans in love with "their" music—be it jazz, blues, country-western, rock and roll, or any of its other myriad forms—and happy to share it with visitors. It's a fun and informative way to tour every region of the U.S.A.

## RECOMMENDED READING

**Bird, Christiane.** *The Da Capo Jazz and Blues Lover's Guide to the U.S.* 3rd Ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 2001.

**Cheseborough, Steve.** *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of Delta Blues.* 2nd Ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.

**Clynes, Tom.** *Music Festivals from Bach to Blues: A Traveler's Guide.* Canton, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1996.

**Dollar, Steve.** *Jazz Guide: New York City.* New York: The Little Bookroom, 2003.

**Fussell, Fred C.** *Blue Ridge Music Trails.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

**Knight, Richard.** *The Blues Highway: New Orleans to Chicago: A Travel and Music Guide.* Hindhead, Surrey, UK: Trailblazer Publications, 2003.

**Millard, Bob.** *Music City USA: The Country Music Lover's Travel Guide to Nashville and Tennessee.* New York: Perennial, 1993.

**Unterberger, Richie.** *Music USA: The Rough Guide.* London: The Rough Guides, 1999.

**John Edward Hasse, Ph.D.,** is a music historian, pianist,



and award-winning author and record producer. He serves as Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, where he founded the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra and the international Jazz Appreciation Month. He is the author of *Beyond*

*Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*, the editor of *Jazz: The First Century*, and the producer-author of the book and three-disc set *The Classic Hoagy Carmichael*, for which he earned two Grammy Award nominations. He lectures widely about American music throughout the United States and other parts of the world. ■