

## Ohio Strikes All the Right Chords

**Who knew the Buckeye State has been so busy making a name for itself in the music world?**

By Eric Gnezda

I wish I could have been there.

On the final Friday night of March 1985, four of Nashville's hottest songwriters sat in a circle and made history.

The writers, three of whom would later earn induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, were booked at the soon-to-be-famous venue, The Bluebird Cafe, where they took a stab at a new concept. Instead of performing on stage, they sat in the middle of the club surrounded by a packed audience whose elbows were close enough to rub against their guitars.



The trial arrangement was the brainchild of Don Schlitz (*The Gambler*) and Fred Knobloch (*Used to Blue*), who were joined by Thom Schuyler (*16th Avenue*) and Paul Overstreet (*Forever and Ever, Amen*).

### Performing In-the-round

The songwriters took turns telling stories, singing their songs and joining in with each other as the moment moved them. As it turned out, both the audience and performers loved the experiment, and the newly coined “in-the-round” format was born, becoming the signature tradition of The Bluebird Cafe.

Now, some 33 years later, the Bluebird, with only 90 seats, is known around the world as an elite venue for songwriters. Among the household names who have performed, or have, in fact, been “discovered” in that room, are Garth Brooks, Trisha Yearwood, Kenny Chesney, Taylor Swift, Vince Gill, Faith Hill and Keith Urban.

Hanging above the front door, beneath the Bluebird's iconic awning, is an engraved wooden sign reading, “The best songwriters in the world pass through these doors.”

As a singer-songwriter, I've enjoyed the privilege of performing at the Bluebird many times, as well as being a frequent audience member. And, yes, for those of us who love to listen to a songwriter performing an original song from the heart, the Bluebird is magical. A trip every music lover needs to make.

But the Bluebird is also a long way from Ohio, not exactly conducive for an evening out.

Fortunately for Ohio—rich in its own musical talent and tradition—this region is becoming even more fertile for songwriters and those who love them. Accordingly, more venues are popping up around the state that provide a listening-room environment.

“We strive to provide a space where people can come out and really enjoy the live-music experience,” said Charlie Jackson, co-owner of Natalie’s Coal-Fired Pizza and Live Music, a 100-seat venue in Worthington that presents music six nights a week. “Great music can bring us together to help create wonderful memories, and it’s a joy and privilege to witness that happening.”

Since opening in 2012, Natalie’s has become a destination venue for top national touring artists in a variety of genres, including Grammy winners, Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame members and Kerrville Festival New Folk finalists.

Columbus attorney Alec Wightman, former chairman of the board and current trustee of Cleveland’s Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, has been bringing some of the nation’s finest songwriters to Ohio for 24 years, purely for the love of the art form.

“As a kid,” he said, “I always respected a great singer, a great guitar player, a great band, great live show. But what I always said I’d give my left arm for was to be able to write the songs.”

Having collaborated with several venues in central Ohio, Wightman, through his Zeppelin Productions, has brought in Jimmy Webb, Art Garfunkel, Rodney Crowell, Tom Russell, Gretchen Peters, Suzy Bogguss, Dave Alvin, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott and the late Guy Clark, among others.



*Songs at the Center* tapes many of its episodes at Ohio's Peggy R. McConnell Arts Center of Worthington.  
DAN MITCHELL/MITCHELL MULTIMEDIA

### **Home-grown Songwriters**

While the number of first-rate touring songwriters coming through Ohio is healthy, this region is also home to many of its own quality singer-songwriters. Craig Heath, a three-time Ohio Music Awards winner, is both a professional songwriter and a venue owner, having opened Appalachian Listening Room in Logan in 2016.

“I can trace my motivation for starting ALR directly to my first opportunity to play the Bluebird,” Heath said.

“After the gig, my wife and

I looked at each other and just knew we had to create a listening room back home.”

Never aspiring to open a venue myself, I nonetheless discovered a similar passion for showcasing fellow songwriters, leading me to create an Ohio-based television series now seen coast to coast. *Called Songs at the Center*, the weekly series is a half-hour show that combines songwriter performances, interviews and spontaneous interaction with the audience.

John Oates, one-half of the bestselling pop duo Hall and Oates, called *Songs at the Center* “a most effective national ambassador for the Columbus arts and music scene.”

Taped at the Peggy R. McConnell Arts Center of Worthington and other select venues around Ohio, *Songs at the Center* airs on 160 PBS stations around the country. *Season four is scheduled for release* in May. The live tapings of *Songs at the Center* are open to the public, offering an in-the-round experience for the audience in attendance and for TV viewers across America.

For live-music lovers, perhaps there’s not a more authentic experience than to hear songwriters sing their own creations and to hear the stories *behind* the songs.

No matter how familiar a song may have become to us on the radio, to hear the original writer perform it “stripped down”—free of studio production, while complete with its original phrasings, interpretations and nuances—almost always provides a new, if not richer, form of enjoyment.

As music fans, we so closely associate a given song with the recording artist that we often—and mistakenly—assume the person singing it also wrote it. *I Can’t Make You Love Me*, for instance, included on many lists of greatest songs of all time, is a signature song for Bonnie Raitt. But it was written by master song craftsmen Mike Reid and Allen Shamblin, who spent months rewriting an idea that came to Reid while reading a newspaper article about a drunken man arrested for shooting at his girlfriend’s car. When asked by the judge if he’d learned anything, the defendant said, “I learned, your honor, that you can’t make a woman love you if she don’t.”

### **Stories Behind the Songs**

Even among less famous works, the stories behind the songs can be entertaining, with plenty of them heard in listening rooms right here in Ohio. Hit songwriter Jasey Schnaars, of Delaware, Ohio, readily shares how his idea for a song evolved from reading a magazine article in which Billy Sherrill, a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and co-writer of *Stand By Your Man* with Tammy Wynette, offered some advice for songwriters with writer’s block: Learn a new instrument. So Schnaars bought a used Martin mandolin for \$100 and learned four chords, which he, with co-writer Schuyler, turned into the top-10 hit *Nothing Like Falling in Love* for the late Eddie Rabbitt.

While some listening rooms are widely known to the public, others remain well-kept secrets among those who frequent them. But a little bit of digging can be worth the effort. H&A

### **Some Listening Rooms In Ohio:**

- Appalachian Listening Room, Logan  
[facebook.com/appalachianlisteningroom](https://www.facebook.com/appalachianlisteningroom)
- Beachland Ballroom and Tavern, Cleveland  
[beachlandballroom.com](https://www.beachlandballroom.com)

- Bokes Creek Winery, Raymond  
[bokescreekwinery.com](http://bokescreekwinery.com)
- Cuyahoga Valley National Park Concert Series, Peninsula  
[conservancyforcvnp.org/calendar/category/concerts](http://conservancyforcvnp.org/calendar/category/concerts)
- Donkey Café and Espresso, Athens  
[donkeycoffee.com](http://donkeycoffee.com)
- Downtowne Listening Room, Cincinnati  
[downtownlisteningroom.com](http://downtownlisteningroom.com)
- Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy  
[furpeaceranch.com](http://furpeaceranch.com)
- Music Box Supper Club, Cleveland  
[musicboxcle.com](http://musicboxcle.com)
- Natalies Coal-Fired Pizza and Live Music, Worthington  
[nataliescoalfiredpizza.com](http://nataliescoalfiredpizza.com)
- Possum Hollow Log Cabin Concerts, St. Paris  
[possumhollowlogcabinconcerts.com](http://possumhollowlogcabinconcerts.com)
- Refectory Dinner Music Series, Columbus  
[refectory.com](http://refectory.com)
- Riverdog, Wakeman  
[riverdogmusic.weebly.com](http://riverdogmusic.weebly.com)
- Thirty One West, Newark  
[thirtyone-west.com](http://thirtyone-west.com)

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