



The Ettes

THE NEW NASHVILLE

Rachel Khona rides into Nashville and discovers that the country town has turned an acoustic corner.

THE LAST TIME I VISITED Nashville I really wanted to meet a country star. I craved big 10-gallon hats, hillbillies with long beards, the Grand Ole Opry, rhinestones, sequins, mullets and a whole lot of southern accents.

Serendipitously enough, my wish was granted. I ran into country star John Rich of the hugely successful duo Big & Rich at a trendy downtown bar. Having no knowledge of country music, I didn't know who John Rich was until someone pointed out the gentleman I was talking to was a country superstar. The only thing I knew was that he was wearing sparkly silver boots and a matching glittery cowboy hat. And that was all I needed to strike up a conversation.

After a little convincing, he agreed to sing us his big hit, 'Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)', a ditty he performed acoustically

with the help of a guitar plucked down from the wall. Only in Nashville could a song like that get produced and earn commercial success, without being interpreted as being part of a *Saturday Night Live* skit or lumped in with the likes of 'Mambo No. 5' or 'I'm Too Sexy'. Oh yeah, Rascal Flatts was there too.

I had come to Nashville to find country and it had found me, in a bar.

But things have changed in the home of country music. Though country and honky-tonk are still very much part of the Nashville music scene, rock has also taken a firm hold. And with the genre has come organic coffee bars, designer boutiques and skinny jeans, all rockin' the foundations of this once exclusively country town.

Locals congregate at Marche Artisan Foods for brunch, before getting their shop on at places like imogene + willie

(designer denim), Local Honey (local designers), Posh (high-end designer) and the Hip Zipper (vintage). Farm-to-table restaurants like City House have elevated the city's dining scene, while hipster fave Mas Tacos brings an ethnic element to an otherwise very American food offering. And while tourists may choose to flock to bars like Tootsies, the locals prefer dives like the Springwater Supper Club & Lounge, bluegrass joint the Station Inn, or, for indie music, the 5 Spot or Exit / In.

Clearly this is not your momma's Nashville.

Nashville's much-storied musical history does feature a few earlier rock'n'roll moments. Both Elvis and Paul McCartney spent time here recording. It's in Nashville that Jimi Hendrix honed his guitar skills with friend Billy Cox after being discharged from a nearby military camp, Fort Campbell. And Bob Dylan found

himself head over heels with the city while recording *Blonde on Blonde*, later returning to record *Nashville Skyline*.

But alas the star power of these few was not enough for anyone to look past Nashville's rhinestone cowboy sparkle. It took several decades after the 60s for any sort of viable change to occur. The shift in scenery started to take place when the Pied Piper of all things hip, Jack White, moved in, bringing his then-wife, English model Karen Elson. Like a slow trickle, White's clout helped draw like-minded folks to the city.

“Everyone pitches in here and everyone supports everyone else,” Hames says. “It’s not competitive; it’s collaborative. And that feels special.””

While Elson opened the now defunct vintage shop Venus and Mars, White opened the first physical location of Third Man Records, fostering local talent and serving as a Mecca of sorts for fans. The label spawned bands like JEFF the Brotherhood and Pujol.

Then there's that little multi-platinum Grammy-award-winning local band, Kings of Leon. When their breakthrough album

Only by the Night was released, their dirty, grungy rock appeal not only helped cement Nashville's dominance in the rock scene, but allowed people to see Nashville for more than just the home of the Grand Ole Opry and Garth Brooks. Kings of Leon even went on to form a record label named Serpents and Snakes, helping bands like The Features and Turbo Fruits gain wider exposure.

Before you could say “cowboy hat”, the glitter quickly gave way to grit, and transplants like The Black Keys,

Paramore and The Ettes moved in. Along with homegrown talents like Pujol and The Honeymoon Thrillers, these bands have transformed Nashville from country capital to America's hottest rock location.

Unlike Seattle in the early 90s or Los Angeles in the 80s, Nashville doesn't seem so bombastic that it might prematurely explode. Music here is more

about escaping the pretension of the bigger city and enjoying the community that comes with living in a smaller town.

Lead singer Lindsay 'Coco' Hames of The Ettes says: “People are very warm and supportive. They're always willing to contribute what they can to other people's projects. For instance, Poni (drums) and I are acting in two Wanda Jackson videos, just because it's Wanda. Or Jem (bass) will fill in when a friend's band's bassist is out of town.”

Whether or not that means Nashville is the next Seattle is yet to be seen. So far the city has only produced one rock band that has had huge commercial success (Kings of Leon), while other well-known artists (The Black Keys, Paramore, Jack White) established their success before arriving in Nashville. Nashville is not known for a particular sound. But that's what makes it unique.

“Everyone pitches in here and everyone supports everyone else,” Hames says. “It's not competitive; it's collaborative. And that feels special.”

“It's Nashville's time right now,” Turbo Fruits lead singer Jonas Stein says. “Come on down! We've got open arms.” ☒

Turbo Fruits
Picture: Kate Brock

get in the know Kings of Leon, a band of brothers, are named after their grandfather, Leon.