



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: HANNAH ARMSTRONG/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; BRIAN CAMP/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; HANNAH ARMSTRONG/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; SCOTT K. BROWN/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION

Strings Attached

The Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail, buzzes with bluegrass and folk music, history, and a welcoming community

BY HILLARY RICHARD

As the air cooled on a late Friday afternoon in March, fiddle-shaped cases began to emerge from car trunks on South Locust Street in Floyd, Virginia. Carrying an upright bass that was nearly her size, a young woman crossed the street toward some musicians already playing, while others waited to join in. A small crowd formed, and a few people started flatfooting on the sidewalk. One woman made her wooden jig doll dance along to the strums of a banjo. I soon learned that this was a typical Floyd pickup, or impromptu jam session—a common scene on weekends in this tiny Blue Ridge Mountains town.

In the span of a few hours, I watched the Floyd Country Store transform from a quiet spot with diners eating sandwiches in booths with checkered tablecloths to a concert hall with rows of seats amid shelves of baseball caps and locally made crafts. The Twin Creeks String Band played guitar, fiddle, banjo, and bass as the crowds descended, dressed in overalls and plaid shirts or jeans and sneakers. The most dedicated patrons wore official clogging shoes with taps, which clicked rhythmically with each shuffling step.

After fueling up on an ice cream sandwich (salted caramel framed by “cow-boy cookies” made with oatmeal, chocolate chips, pecans, and coconut) from the soda fountain next door—and some cajoling by the spry 84-year-old woman sitting next to me—I gathered the courage to jump in and learn some steps. People were as eager to teach as they were to applaud, which made the experience more fun. But really, it was all about getting up and moving to the music.

Family bands of children performed. A couple celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary. There were a few birthdays in the crowd. Later in the night, Floyd Country Store co-owner Heather Krantz held the weekly contest to see who had traveled the farthest—someone from Massachusetts won the title. “Oh, that’s nothing,” a man leaned over to tell me. “There’s usually at least one international person here each week.”

Clockwise from top right: Musicians perform at the Floyd Country Store; folks gather in Floyd for impromptu jam sessions; the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol; the 1880s-built Carter Family cabin in Hiltons.



Clockwise from top right: Guitars built by students at the Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts; State Street in Bristol is in both Tennessee and Virginia; a crowd watches a performance at the Blue Ridge Music Center.

The Big Bang

Visitors flock to Southwest Virginia to experience a unique cultural slice of America along The Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. The trail highlights four cities and more than 50 towns across 300 miles of the Blue Ridge Highlands and Appalachia, all with ties to folk music history. And the town of Floyd is but one stop.

This trail is more “choose your own adventure” than one set driving route. The Ralph Stanley Museum in Clintwood pays homage to the famous bluegrass musician. You can build your own guitar in a weeklong workshop at the Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts in Marion. The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace in Abingdon showcases Appalachian music and artisans. The Blue Ridge Music Center in Galax has a

museum and concerts. And you can make sense of the area's musical history at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol.

“Southwest Virginia is home to such a high concentration of cultural caretakers, musicians, dancers, and artists,” says Tyler Hughes, a professional banjo player and square dance caller, as well as the executive director of The Crooked Road. “We say that depending on where you are in the region, you could hear traditional music every night of the week. I always say that when you're traveling here, you're experiencing the real lives of mountain people. It's not only unique, it's authentic.”

As it turns out, the “big bang” of country music began in the Taylor-Christian Hat and Glove Company building on Bristol's State Street, which sits on the border of Virginia and Tennessee and is split evenly down the middle. In July 1927, talent scout and producer Ralph Peer arrived on behalf of the Victor Talking Machine Corporation to check out what was then called “hillbilly music,” or “mountain music.” The time was right: The invention of electrical recording in 1925 created demand for recorded music nationwide, and Bristol's railroad connected the city to studios in New York and New Jersey.

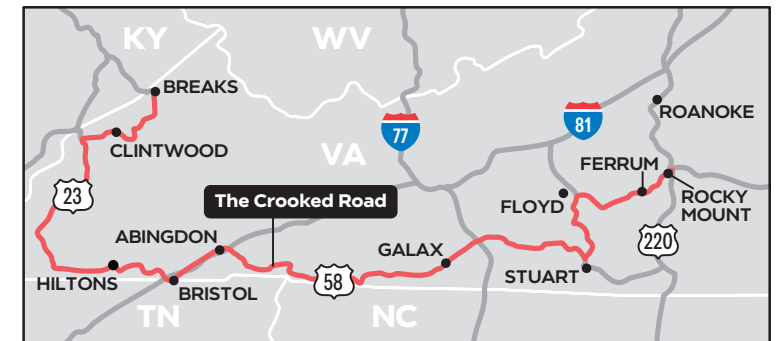
Peer offered local artists a mere \$50 (nearly \$1,000 today) to play, and he recorded 19 musical acts and 76 songs over 10 days. The recording sessions would go on to revolutionize modern country

music. Three big stars emerged from the Bristol Sessions: Ernest Stoneman (already a growing “hillbilly” artist, who helped Peer scout out local talent), Jimmie Rodgers, and the Carter Family.

First Family of Country Music

The Carter Family consisted of spouses Sara and A.P. Carter and Sara's cousin Maybelle Carter, who married A.P.'s brother Ezra. They brought popular Appalachian traditions, like powerful harmonies and gospel hymns, into the mainstream, earning the moniker the First Family of Country Music.

Maybelle was famous for the “Carter scratch,” a guitar-picking style that transcended genres and became a benchmark for guitar players (Paul McCartney used the Carter scratch on The Beatles' “Blackbird”). Both Sara and Maybelle played the autoharp, which became synonymous with the Carter Family. A.P. was a notable song collector and arranger, often traveling to collect 200-year-old religious and folk songs and officially record oral histories. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” a hymn the Carter Family reworked and recorded as “Can the Circle Be Unbroken,” has been covered by everyone from Dolly Parton and Bob Dylan to the Black Crowes.



Johnny Cash, who called the Bristol Sessions “the single most important event in the history of country music,” later joined the famous family. To Rita Forrester, he's just John, the man who married her cousin June Carter Cash. Forrester is the executive director of the Carter Family Memorial Music Center museum preserves the music family's legacy through artifacts and memorabilia in an old general store built by A.P. Carter.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ANDREW COTHERN/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; STAR CITY SKYCAMS/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; EDWIN RENSBERG/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

HANNAH ARMSTRONG/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION



Clockwise from top right: Visitors dance to live music for the 50th anniversary of the Carter Family Fold in April 2024; the exterior of the Carter Family Memorial Music Center museum; songbooks and instruments are among the museum's artifacts.

Into the Fold

After a 45-minute drive along winding, bucolic backroads from Bristol, I arrived at the Fold about an hour before the Saturday night concert. The Fold runs on volunteer labor and is truly a community effort. The chili served here is made from a Carter family recipe, acoustic music is preferred, and smoking and drinking are not allowed.

Peggy Hensley has been volunteering here for nearly 50 years as a ticket taker and has seen it all. She has stories of Del McCoury, Earl Scruggs, and John Paul Jones of Led Zeppelin, who each played the mandolin here. Sara and Maybelle Carter performed their final shows here, as did Johnny Cash.

“Johnny loved coming here because it reminded him of how simply things began and how much the Carters did to see that [country] music is where it is today. He was always keenly aware of that. He put them front and center,” Forrester recalled, adding



that whenever the Fold needed to raise funds, Cash would play a show.

I felt a rush when the music began. As the New River Wranglers’ jaunty bluegrass filled the stage, the dancers in the crowd sauntered to the floor, many with taps clicking away. It was a hodgepodge of people having fun—some new and clueless, some seasoned enough to wear matching outfits for the occasion. During intermission, visitors wandered onstage to look at the photos and memorabilia lining the wall. With a history like this, you never know who might be in the audience on any given Saturday night.

There’s a humbleness along the Crooked Road that doesn’t exist in other larger music hubs. Locals seem genuinely excited to meet out-of-town visitors and chat with them, and to share the experience of live music. There are no strangers here—just people who haven’t learned how to dance to bluegrass yet.

HILLARY RICHARD is a writer and road trip aficionado who grew up listening to all types of music. Her mother is an opera singer and a pianist, and her grandfather played the banjo.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JOEY WHARTON/VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION; HANNAH ARMSTRONG VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION (2)