



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The Appalachian Mountains as seen from Powell Valley Overlook; Rita Forrester, executive director of the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons; picnic tables at the Fold; the Rex Theater, in Galax.

AN OLD, OLD SONG

Appalachian music, born in southwestern Virginia, evolved into bluegrass and country.

Hillary Richard visits the mountain towns where the early songbooks are still in use.

I GREW UP in a musical household, and my earliest memories are of random instruments, songbooks, and a constant stream of family and friends performing. Music was how my mother—an opera singer, pianist, and educator—taught me to engage with the world. She believed that music and community were inextricably linked.

Few places in the U.S. hold this sentiment as deeply as southwestern Virginia, where 18th-century settlers blended Scotch-Irish, English, African, and German influences to create Appalachian music—the forebear to what’s known today as bluegrass. Traditionally played on string instruments like the dulcimer, fiddle, and banjo, this distinctly twangy genre passed down religious hymns, ballads, and folktales through generations.

When our family jam sessions occasionally veered into bluegrass, they always left an impression on me. So last fall, while the days were still warm, I took a drive along what’s known as the Crooked Road, a 330-mile network of small Virginia towns where Appalachian music still flourishes. Across a long weekend, I stopped at a handful of the 60-plus venues where old-time string bands perform, sometimes in spontaneous gatherings known as “pickups.” It was a chance to meet the people who keep this music alive.

I began in the town of Abingdon, where I stayed at the historic **Martha Washington Inn & Spa** (doubles from \$275), originally a 19th-century

women’s college. Rooms of antiques and framed senior portraits from decades gone reference the building’s past. Legend has it that a former student still haunts it, playing her violin at night as she mourns a lost love. Thankfully, my first night in Appalachia consisted only of a restful sleep.

The next morning, I set out for the **Blue Ridge Music Center** in the small city of Galax, which hosts a series of “Midday Mountain Music” sessions each day from May through October. A string trio was playing a stirring sequence of traditional numbers on an outdoor patio. The venue is encircled by a towering curtain of oaks, poplars, and pines, and each note seemed to hang in the air for the rapt audience.



Pickering House Inn, New Hampshire A frequent World’s Best Award-winning hotel, Pickering House is so old-school New England that you half expect Paul Revere to ride in carrying a lantern. Every year when I visit family in Wolfeboro for the Fourth of July, I dip into the inn as we walk to the parade in the town center. Adding to its all-American charm, it’s within walking distance of Lake Winnepesaukee and my favorite ice cream window, Bailey’s Bubble. Doubles from \$675. —**Maya Kachroo-Levine**

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: KYLE LAFERRIERE/COURTESY OF VIRGINIA TOURISM; HANNAH ARMSTRONG/COURTESY OF VIRGINIA TOURISM; JOEY WHARTON/COURTESY OF VIRGINIA TOURISM; CASTLE LIGHT IMAGES/LAHEY



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
The Blue Ridge Music Center, in Galax; the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, in Bristol; the Friday Night Jamboree in Floyd.

Eventually, I tore myself away to start the next leg. As I drove on, the topography cycled through vine-covered trees, rolling hills, and rocky landscapes, only dotted occasionally with homes. With the songs from Galax still ringing in my head, I realized the vital role of music as a reason for gathering in this remote landscape.

I checked into the **Lodge at Primland, Auberge Collection** (*doubles from \$909*), a sprawling property where it took 20 minutes just to reach the main lodge from the entrance gates. After stargazing, ATVing, hiking, and spotting a black bear, deer, and countless butterflies over the next two days across the lodge's 12,000 acres, I understood the allure of such seclusion.

Eager to dance, I headed on to the former mill town of Fries. At the **Historic Fries Theatre**, the audience shuffled and clogged to tunes performed by an ensemble of independent musicians gathered for the night; though each had their own stand-alone musical life, they played together so smoothly, anyone would have mistaken them for a touring band. Then around 8 p.m., 14 homemade cakes were arranged on the center stage. The night transitioned into a charity cakewalk—the crowd dancing in a circle, waiting for the music to stop and a winning number to be called.

The following day, I was wandering South Locust Street in the artistic community of Floyd when I stumbled

upon a group of musicians jamming together. A lone fiddler asked to join, and they briefly discussed potential songs before finding a suitable match and jumping into a lively performance. Another player had a bumper sticker on his instrument case that happily announced: “Bluegrass musician, driver has no cash.”

The **Floyd Country Store** is one of the most popular stops in the region. Each Friday night, locals and visitors pour into the renovated general store and its old-fashioned soda fountain next door for live music and dancing. Don’t worry if you don’t know the dances: minutes after the Crooked Road Ramblers started their set, an older gentleman named Denzel asked me to two-step, teaching me the footwork that went along with each tune. During the slower songs, a mustachioed mechanic named Wilfred cut in.

On the last day of my trip, I drove southwest to Bristol, a small city that



Bellagio, Las Vegas The one time I stayed at the Bellagio, it seemed like I might never get out—and that I might not need to. Loosely inspired by the eponymous village on Lake Como, the resort seems to reach in all directions, with 3,933 guest rooms, endless casinos, a theater that hosts O by Cirque du Soleil performances, and more signature restaurants than you can shake a T-bone steak at (including Le Cirque, Michael Mina, and Carbone). But it’s the outdoor fountains that everyone remembers, putting on their propulsive musical show every evening. *Doubles from \$159. —Peter Terzian*



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT *The Lodge at Primland, Auberge Collection, in Meadows of Dan; one of the hotel's tree houses; patrons at the Floyd Country Store's soda fountain.*

straddles the Tennessee border. In 1927, the Victor Talking Machine Company sent talent scout and producer Ralph Peer there to create field recordings of what was then called “hillbilly” or “mountain” music. The Bristol Sessions, as they came to be called, resulted in a series of vinyl releases that brought Appalachian sounds to the masses. Historians refer to them as the “big bang” of country music.

One of the acts catapulted onto the national stage in the aftermath was the Carter Family. The trio—spouses Sara and A. P. Carter and Sara’s cousin Maybelle—became famous for their tight harmonies and their interpretations of gospel hymns. On my way to the **Carter Family Fold**, a museum and performance space in nearby Hiltons that preserves their legacy, I listened to the group’s rendition of “Can the Circle Be Unbroken.” The song has since been covered by everyone from Bob Dylan to Johnny Cash—who recalled hearing it at the age of four, sung by the woman who would become his mother-in-law after he married Maybelle Carter’s daughter, June.

When I reached the Fold, a quartet called the New River Wranglers was playing, and as they picked up steam, locals of all ages took turns stepping across the floor. Armed with my know-how from the previous night, I was only slightly intimidated when A. P. and Sara’s granddaughter Rita Carter Forrester, the executive director of the Fold,



encouraged me to join the crowd. She runs a wholesome show: smoking and drinking are forbidden; the popcorn, cake, and sandwiches are homemade; and the same ticket takers have been volunteering for decades.

As I departed southwestern Virginia, I felt a familiar sense of nostalgia for the spontaneous musical gatherings of my childhood, where enthusiasm counted nearly as much as talent. In each town I’d visited, I’d listened to musicians for whom performing appeared effortless—skilled artists energized as much by the sheer fun of playing together as by their technical craft—and been welcomed into a full-fledged community affair. From the dancers to the cake makers to the ticket takers, everyone has a role to play. What endures isn’t just the sound, but the spirit.

MORE PLACES TO STOP

COEBURN

Lays Hardware Center for the Arts, a hardware-store-turned-theater, hosts weekly jam sessions on Thursdays and traditional Appalachian music performances on Fridays.

NORTON

The red-roofed, wood-paneled **Country Cabin** is the longest continuously running venue on the Crooked Road, with shows every Saturday and clogging and line-dancing classes throughout the year.

GALAX

The historic **Rex Theater** has live performances every Friday, and the Old Fiddler’s Convention welcomes a cohort of musicians to compete each year.

MARION

The **Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts**, named after the world-renowned guitar maker, offers classes and events in a renovated 1908 schoolhouse.



St. Louis Union Station Hotel This former bustling train terminal, built in 1894, is now a hotel with 65-foot barrel-vaulted ceilings, train-themed rooms, and original stained-glass windows. I recommend leaning into the Gilded Age elegance by ordering up a railroad-inspired cocktail in the Grand Hall. **Doubles from \$250.—Mae Hamilton**