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VENUE DE FORCE

STORY BY JIM CASEY

FROM HALLOWED grounds to natural wonders, the force is strong with these five iconic venues.

Guys like Luke Bryan and Jason Aldean may be selling out arena shows in 2015, but bigger isn't always better when it comes to watching your favorite country artists perform live. Sometimes it's the setting of an iconic venue that makes a concert memorable . . . so memorable, in fact, that you commemorate the experience by framing your tickets or shelling out the extra cash for a playbill on your way out the door.

Forget about packing the binoculars and tissues for a nosebleed arena seat, here's a cross-country sampling of playbill-worthy venues to put on your 2015 to-do list (or bucket list)—and a few upcoming concerts that will put you in a country state of mind.

RYMAN AUDITORIUM

NASHVILLE

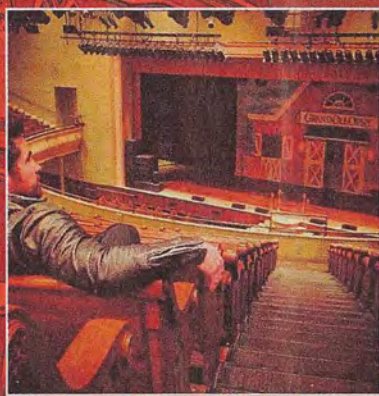
FEB. 24: LEE BRICE

MARCH 3-4: WILLIE NELSON

In a city that boasts pilgrimage-worthy stops like the Grand Ole Opry House and Bluebird Cafe, Nashville's Ryman Auditorium is still the holy grail of venues.

Constructed in 1891, the red-bricked tabernacle is a beacon in Nashville's bustling downtown for performers and fans alike. With its stained-glass windows, wooden pews and memorabilia displays, the 2,362-seat Mother Church of Country Music is a revival of sight and sound when artists take to its hallowed stage.

Kip Moore packs the house—er, church—at the Ryman in October 2014; (below) JT Hodges has the place all to himself.



RYMAN AUDITORIUM: KIP MOORE PERFORMING BY JOSEPH LILIANE / THE GREEN ROOM PR. EMPIT. HOUSE COURTESY JT HODGES INSTAGRAM

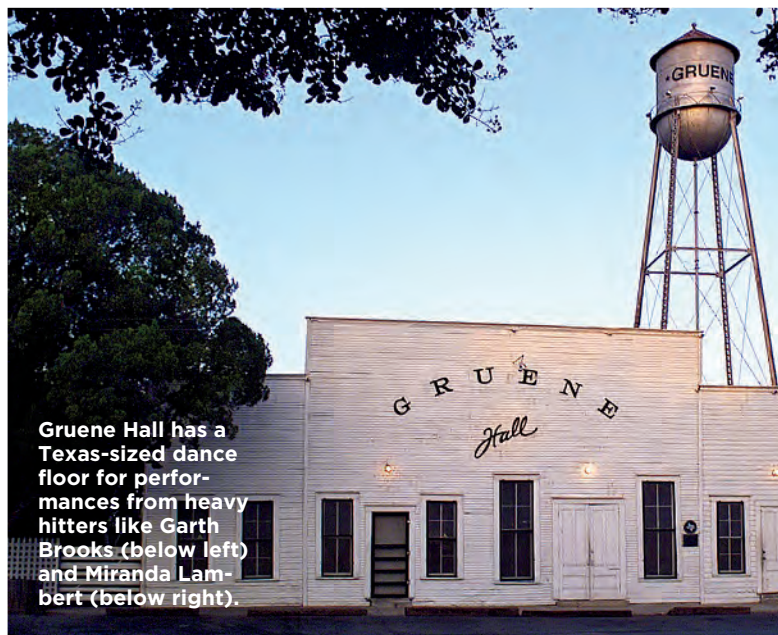


Come early for a wrap-around balcony seat; (below) the Bowery lights up the Lower East Side.

BOWERY BALLROOM NEW YORK CITY

FEB. 9: ROBERT EARL KEEN; FEB. 11: STURGILL SIMPSON

From the main floor to the wraparound balcony, there's not a bad sightline in the 575-capacity venue that was built in the 1920s, and that includes the view of Delancey Street from the balcony's stained-glass window. Part speakeasy, part opera house, the Bowery features high ceilings, stellar acoustics and a friendly basement lounge where you can grab a drink at the U-shaped bar or strike up a conversation before the show. But it's the main floor full of revelers that puts the roar in this Lower East Side locale.



Gruene Hall has a Texas-sized dance floor for performances from heavy hitters like Garth Brooks (below left) and Miranda Lambert (below right).

GRUENE HALL

NEW BRAUNFELS, TEXAS

FEB. 21: HAYES CARLL

MARCH 3: RYAN BINGHAM

Gruene Hall was built in 1878 and is billed as the oldest continually run dance hall in Texas—and you'd better be wearing a six-shooter if you say otherwise, 'cause them there are fightin' words. With a pitched tin roof and side flaps for open-air dancing, the 6,000-square-foot hall is a Texas throwback to the days of yore, where you can pitch horseshoes out back, drain a cold Shiner at the bar or two-step on the wooden dance floor to a lineup of performers that reads like a historical marker.

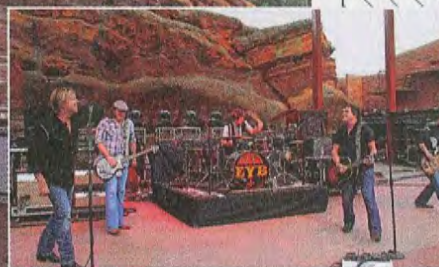


RED ROCKS AMPHITHEATRE

GOLDEN, COLO.

MAY 17: ALAN JACKSON

Thanks to Mother Nature and a little early-20th-century ingenuity, you always have a seat with a view at Red Rocks, regardless if anyone is performing. The aesthetic prodigiousness of the open-air amphitheater is highlighted by two red sandstone monoliths that make the 9,000-plus-seat venue an acoustic anomaly. Couple the majestic setting with a live performance for an experience that can't be duplicated anywhere in the world.



Red Rocks' iconic stage has featured Eric Church (top) and Eli Young Band (above).



Fillmore's chandeliers keep the crowds' attention as often as the performances; (below) playbills line the walls of the main room.

THE FILLMORE SAN FRANCISCO

FEB. 4-5: LUCINDA WILLIAMS; FEB. 14: ST. PAUL & THE BROKEN BONES

With museum-quality playbills adorning its walls in the main room and strobe lights a-swirling, the Fillmore is still redolent of the psychedelia that made San Francisco a counterculture hot spot in the 1960s. While that era may be over, the music lives on in this classic venue that features rows of grandiose chandeliers and a wooden dance floor that surges and buckles to the music. And in the tradition of Fillmore founder Bill Graham, you always get a free apple . . . and a poster of the evening's show if it's sold out.

