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BILLY FOLSOM



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Branching out at Joshua Tree

A less-celebrated music scene in the California desert offers a vibrant, affordable option

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Three years ago, I took a music-themed trip to the California desert with my photographer friend Gaston Lacombe. We savored desert sunrises, enjoyed live music, talked to artists and befriended locals. And here's the catch: We weren't at Coachella.

The first Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival took place one weekend 20 years ago at the Empire Polo Club in Indio, Calif., 25 miles east of Palm Springs. The event has become so wildly successful that it expanded to two weekends in 2012 and spawned another festival, Stagecoach, in 2007. This year, Coachella will be held April 12-14 and April 19-21 (Stagecoach is April 26-28). But it's not for music fans who favor small performances or who travel on a budget. If you managed to snag a weekend pass before they sold out in January, you're out \$429; if you sprang for a teepee and passes for two, you coughed up \$2,458. For the rest of us — who take pleasure in exploring the periphery of big events and treasure intimate settings, there's the High Desert.

Starting at Palm Springs, a resort city sprinkled with white light-encircled palm trees, Gaston and I drove about one hour (30 miles) north and straight into the mountains of the Mojave Desert. We first hit the town of Yucca Valley and explored from there: Joshua Tree, Twentynine Palms and Wonder Valley to the east; Pioneertown and Landers to the north. The towns are dusty, Joshua trees look like they've escaped from a Dr. Seuss book, and the locals include scorpions and tumbleweeds. But an eclectic, bohemian and welcoming community of artists is drawn to the fragile terrain, wide vistas and tranquility, and has forged a good life in this giant sandbox.

Scott Wexton, a Detroit transplant and former touring musician who opened the record and comic book shop HooDoo in 2011 (where I bought an International Submarine Band album in white vinyl), recently told me that the variety of music in the High Desert — a.k.a. the Hi Desert, which includes the higher-elevation areas of the Mojave — has changed. "Ten to 15 years ago, it was fairly singular — largely Americana," he said. "Now there's a whole lot more. For a desert community, there's a lot going on."

Musicians in genres as diverse as blues and deathrock, punk and electropop have gravitated to the area, which also draws big-name entertainers who come to clear their heads, recharge their batteries and find inspiration and solace.

"In earlier years, Joshua Tree was a little more of an outpost, a little more adventurous," said Ted Quinn, a leader in the arts community who moved to the High Desert in the 1990s and has hosted open-mic nights for 18 years at a

variety of local venues. "Now, it's better known, and there's art and music here every night."

When Gaston and I visited, we were working on an assignment about Gram Parsons, who founded the International Submarine Band and was known for blending rock, country and blues — what he then called cosmic American music and we now call alternative country. Parsons briefly joined the Byrds, formed the Flying Burrito Brothers and often visited Joshua Tree National Park, then a national monument with unpaved roads. In 1973, at the age of 26, Parsons died of a drug overdose in Room No. 8 of the Joshua Tree Inn, and his friends stole his body and partially cremated it in the park, near Cap Rock. His connection to Joshua Tree still draws visitors from all over the world.

Our first night, we checked into the inn, next to Parsons's room, and hit open-mic night at Pappy & Harriet's, a biker bar turned international indie music destination. New Yorkers Robyn Celia and Linda Krantz bought Pappy's in 2003 and have booked artists such as Lucinda Williams, Kurt Vile, Cat Power, Sean Lennon and Rufus Wainwright, with occasional superstar surprise guests such as Paul McCartney and Robert Plant. Located about a half-hour away from Joshua Tree in Pioneertown (a faded strip of frontier-era fa-



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



GINNY WINN/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: The music group Sibleys, singer-songwriter Mike Stinson and cousins Rosa and Maesa Pullman perform at Palms Restaurant, a roadhouse in Wonder Valley, Calif., that is known for its free-spirit vibe.

MIDDLE: Joshua Tree and other nearby towns in the high desert have become magnets for musicians. Visitors can find live music and open mics most days of the week and music festivals in the spring and fall.

ABOVE: Gram Parsons often visited Joshua Tree National Park before his death in 1973. His friends stole his body and partially cremated it in the park, and his connection to the area still draws visitors.

ades built by Hollywood investors in the '40s — and not much else), the bar has an outdoor arena and smaller indoor stage. Dinner reservations fill up weeks in advance, and even Monday open-mic nights are standing room only.

"People drive up this mountain road in the middle of nowhere and it's a two-hour wait [for a dinner table], and they're like, 'What?'" said Celia. On Pappy's voice mail, she warns callers, "I've got to be upfront with you guys. The wait can be kind of ridiculous."

Since 2012, the bar has also hosted Coachella side shows — performances by Coachella artists held at smaller regional venues between festival weekends. Tickets are usually released in mid-February and sell out quickly.

Palms Restaurant, a desert roadhouse in Wonder Valley, is even farther from civilization than Pappy's. It's known for its free-spirit vibe and avant-garde performances — such as Wonder Valley Experimental (March 30), a festival of experimental music; imagine pots and pans and concrete mixers as instruments.

"We get a mix of locals, tourists and people driving through on the way to Vegas," said Kevin Bone, who books talent for the Palms and planned the Hi-Desert Hukilau Music Festival, April 19 and 20, to coincide with the second weekend of Coachella; the lineup includes

Victoria Williams, Ben Vaughn and Rosa Pullman. "If you think about Burning Man, some people are willing to drive all the way out to the desert," Bone said. "Those are the people who prefer that we're in the middle of nowhere, prefer to see music under the stars." He said patrons also like the free camping for festivals available on the Palms grounds and Sunday brunch with \$2 Bloody Marys.

In Joshua Tree, Quinn hosts a popular open mic every Tuesday at the Joshua Tree Saloon, and a local songwriter-poet known as Rags and Bones plays a lunch set there Mondays and Fridays. Across the street, Pie for the People makes pizzas called the David Bowie and the Barry White. Joshua Tree Art Walk, on the second Saturday of the month, includes music at venues such as the Beatnik Lounge, Taylor Junction and Zannedelins, and Harrison House is a residency and performance space based in the late composer Lou Harrison's straw bale desert retreat.

Landers Brew Co., about 16 miles north of Joshua Tree, is what singer-songwriter Joe City Garcia calls "one of the last real desert bars." Located up a dirt road from the community of Landers, the bar (not a brewery) hosts Garcia's Urban Desert Cabaret — a well-attended "residency" that features songwriters and composers — every Saturday.

The High Desert has a number of underground music venues such as Furstwurld, artist and collector Bobby Furst's Quonset hut performance space. Ask around when you get to town, and a local will probably point you in the right direction. Do the same to find out about word-of-mouth house concerts and "generator parties," so called because, as one local explained, "You plug into a generator in the middle of the desert and play music."

The quintessential off-the-grid spot for musicians is the park itself. Parsons is largely credited with drawing some early singer-songwriters there, and since then, many artists have made pilgrimages to compose lyrics, play music and shoot album covers and videos. (Although the cover for U2's 1987 album "The Joshua Tree" was shot elsewhere in the Mojave Desert.) "Here, it's wide open," Quinn told me. "It's more conducive to hearing your own muse."

Sometimes, the desert even offers music of its own. Gaston and I camped at the park our final night, next to a group of performers from Alberta, Canada. Burrowed into sleeping bags, we fell asleep to the folk music they were playing around the campfire. The shrill yips of a coyote roused me during the night. I woke to a pink sunrise and silence.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer based in the District. Her website is melaniedgkaplan.com. Find her on Twitter: @melaniedgkaplan

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HIGH DESERT MUSIC VENUES

Call ahead or check online for updated schedules. You can find more venues and a list of upcoming events in the online version of this article at washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel.

Pappy & Harriet's: Live music nightly (closed Tuesday and Wednesday), including open mic on Monday. Check the phone recording for event schedules (760-365-5956). Shows are general admission; tickets don't include a table for dinner (and vice-versa).

Palms Restaurant: Friday open mic, 7 p.m., hosted by Grey Hill. April 13: San Francisco

accordionist and performance artist Skyler Fell and Oregon Western-inspired folk duo Intuitive Compass, 7 p.m., cover TBD. facebook.com/palmswondervalley/

Joshua Tree Saloon: Free live music most days. Monday and Friday: Local songwriter-poet Rags Rosenberg, a.k.a. Rags and Bones, plays a lunch set, 1 to 3 p.m.; Tuesday: Ted Quinn hosts open mic and jam session, 7 p.m.; Wednesday and Friday: karaoke, 7 p.m. Most weekends, the saloon hosts an outdoor yard party with live music and barbecue. joshuatreesaloon.com

Harrison House Music, Arts & Ecology: Solo cellist Eric Byers performs March 13, 7 p.m., \$20. louharrisonhouse.org

Landers Brew Co.: Indoor and outdoor live music including soulful singer-songwriter Joe City Garcia's Urban Desert Cabaret, a Saturday

night residency. The weekly "UDC Rez" features visiting guest songwriters and composers, 8 p.m., free. Guests include Gabriel Hart, Megan Hutch (April 6), Rosa Pullman, Rags and Bones (April 13), Robert Garson (April 20) and Amilia K. Spicer, Kaz Murphy (April 27). urbandesertcabaret.com

Furstwurld: Hosts dozens of events a year, including music, performance art, film and poetry. April 6: Hammer of the Ozz, a Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath tribute band. April 13: Trees Speak, an experimental rock band and sound laboratory. Doors at 8 p.m., suggested donation \$10 to \$20. Email Furst at bobbyfurst@gmail.com.

INFORMATION

joshuatree.guide

M.D.G.K.

Find the author's complete list of Joshua Tree music festivals and venues online at washingtonpost.com/travel