

## Big Time in Tune Town

In Branson, Mo., the stars of yesterday have found an unlikely encore -- and created a phenomenon that keeps the faithful coming back in droves

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Lauren Wilcox

IF THERE IS AN AFTERLIFE FOR COUNTRY MUSIC SINGERS, it must look something like this: a spacious auditorium, climate-controlled and spotless. Each of its upholstered seats has an unimpeded view of the stage, which is wide and deep enough for a singer and a full complement of musicians, as well as two statuesque backup singers in spangled gowns, and a white-lacquered piano. The country music singer -- in this case, Mickey Gilley -- is equally refined, in glossy cowboy boots and a suit discreetly studded with black rhinestones. The backdrop is an enormous video screen, onto which is projected a life-size image of a roadhouse bar, providing some of the rough romance of such a setting without the cigarette smoke or drunken brawls.

Gilley is nearly 70, but his voice is rich and polished. Every seat in the auditorium is filled, and the crowd is responsive, appreciative, polite -- a performer's dream. The visitors know by heart the words to all his songs; they sing along without prompting. Now and then, people make their way up to the edge of the stage, where they wave at Gilley or take his picture or even, like one man in red suspenders and khaki shorts, reach up and shake Gilley's hand vigorously and at length, let go, and then grab it again, because, why not, it's Mickey Gilley, at the Mickey Gilley Theatre in Branson, Mo., "Live Entertainment Capital of the World," and such a chance might not come again. At least not until tomorrow's show.

I've come to Branson to investigate how this mountain hamlet, population 7,000, has produced this slogan, "Live Entertainment Capital of the World." Branson has long been a regional destination with a modest local music scene, but in the last 15 years or so, a number of bigger names have set up shop along the two-lane highway that runs through town: seasoned, if not grizzled, entertainers such as Andy Williams, Mel Tillis, Bobby Vinton and the Oak Ridge Boys, as well as seeming outliers such as the Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff, and a spate of low-budget nostalgia shows with themes such as the '60s, Elvis and John Wayne. It is true, too, that people are coming -- by one estimate, the town now hosts nearly 8 million visitors a year, putting it handily in the league of the nation's most popular tourist destinations. What is less clear, at least from the outside, is why.

Gilley was never a superstar, but he had a respectable career that peaked in the late '70s and early '80s, when he had a string of Top 10 country hits and his nightclub, Gilley's, in Pasadena, Tex., was featured in the movie "Urban Cowboy." From the looks of it -- a sea of bottle-blond perms and oiled steel-gray pompadours -- the folks at his show were probably in their honky-tonking prime during his most successful years. "You ladies made this a No. 1 hit for me," Gilley says before waving a glittering hand and singing "A Room Full of Roses." A little frisson of anticipation sweeps the room.

Gilley moved to Branson in 1991, after his career and lifestyle slowed down at the end of the '80s. Most of his band in Branson is made up of his longtime musicians who made the move with him. "The Urban Cowboy went downhill," he says. "Everything changes in time." His performance schedule is still full -- he plays five nights a week, about six months a year -- but he finds Branson's laid-back atmosphere suits him. "I'm at the point now when I can't party like I used to," he says. He appreciates the freedom of owning his own theater. "I get to do exactly what I want to here," he says. "I get to meet the people." As it turns out, it has also been a wise business decision. "I haven't had a hit record in God knows how long, but I've sold more records here than I ever have," he says.

Outside, after the show, traffic on State Route 76 is creeping along in what I come to learn is one of Branson's twice-daily traffic jams, dependable as the tides, which commence at the conclusion of the 2 o'clock and 8 o'clock shows. There are 48 theaters in Branson, and on any given day, including weekdays, there are dozens of live shows. The Strip, as the route is called, is a lower-wattage, G-rated version of its Las Vegas namesake, knee-deep in a few generations of tourist attractions: a Ripley's Believe It or Not, Old West photo places, all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets, vintage motor lodges such as the Thunderbird Motel ("We Believe in Jesus"), and dinosaur- and jungle-themed miniature golf courses with dyed blue water in the waterfalls and active volcanoes. The road winds gently through the landscape. In this part of Missouri, the Ozarks have a regular, rolling quality, more a series of undulating hills than mountains, and Branson sits among them like a small craft in a choppy sea.

I am staying at the Alpenrose Inn, off a side street at the edge of town, a two-star hotel done in pale mauve stucco with vaguely alpine garrets at the corners. The key to my room is an actual key, made of brass. I mention to the clerk that I'd like to park my rental car within view of my room.

"You can park it by the office if you want," he says politely, and then can't resist a little sniff of disgust at my concern. "Branson," he says. "The only crime here is Andy Williams singing off-key."

BRANSON'S TRANSFORMATION FROM TINY MOUNTAIN TOWN WITH A FEW PROVISIONAL ACTS to a thriving tourist destination has been slow but sure, the product, in large part, of a century's worth of fortuitous events as well as some well-timed publicity. A hundred years ago, the area that would become the town was a remote but increasingly popular regional spot for hunting and fishing. It became more popular with the national success of a novel set in the area, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, loosely based on the story of local characters, which piqued the curiosity of travelers.

Recreational fishing increased with the construction of Table Rock Dam, completed in 1958; in the 1960s, a family from Illinois bought a local cave and turned it into a tourist attraction. Around the same time, a couple of local families, the Presleys and the Mabes, began performing music and comedy routines -- also in area caves.

Throughout the '70s and '80s, the Presleys and Mabes began touring regionally in the off-season. Other family acts built theaters in Branson, and the town's reputation grew. In 1983, country music virtuoso Roy Clark, co-host of the television show "Hee Haw," opened a theater in town and began booking nationally known country artists. Branson's entertainment community started promoting itself on cable's Nashville Network, and by 1990, Branson had a healthy country music scene, which brought in 3 1/2 million visitors a year.

In 1991, "60 Minutes" sent a news team to Branson, and the resulting 20-minute piece included a few moments that people still recall today as turning points in the town's history. "The reporters called Branson the live country music capital of America," Chamber of Commerce representative Dan Lennon says. "And they said that seniors love it here." Perhaps the most memorable moment came in an interview with aging country music star Mel Tillis, to whom a reporter said, "I've heard that here you can make \$6 million in six months."

That's about right," Tillis agreed.

Within a year, the number of first-time visitors to Branson had doubled. Within two years, a dozen acts had built their own theaters there. Today, performers in the golden years of their careers who have settled here, or who make regular stops here, include Jim Stafford, the Gatlin Brothers, Debbie Reynolds, the Chiffons, Fabian and the five surviving members of Bill Haley's Comets, whose song "Rock Around the Clock" became a hit back in 1954. There are also a number of revues, tribute shows to artists such as Hank Williams and Patsy Cline; and several "jubilees" and "jamborees." Visitors to Branson, says Lennon, are about "one-third the World War II generation, one-third recent retirees and empty-nesters, and one-third families." Though the number of first-time visitors has increased in the last five years, to nearly 25 percent, Branson remains predominantly a repeat destination, with a large and loyal constituency. Branson is the No. 3 motor coach destination in the United States, says Lennon, after New York City and Washington.

Glen and Mary Norman, of Center Hill, Ark., came for their 40th wedding anniversary last year. They went to see Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" show. "I'm 59, so that's what I grew up with," Glen Norman says. "Bobby Vee and Fabian were there that night, and Chubby Checker was in the audience." They also visited '57 Heaven, a museum devoted to cars made in 1957. "The '57 was a pretty hot little car," Norman says.

Nancy and Bobby Thompson, of Searcy, Ark., caught an Andy Williams show a few years ago. "Of course, he's very elderly," Nancy Thompson says of Williams. "But after you were there for a few minutes and got over the shock of seeing him so old, his voice was just as wonderful as it always was. He sounded exactly like he did 30 years ago." But the shows that have long been the mainstay of entertainment in Branson are the old family acts, such as the Presley Family and the Mabeses' show, the Baldknobbers Jamboree. The Mabes built the first theater in Branson; the Presleys were the first to build

a theater on the Strip, in 1967. That theater, with a few new wings, is where they still perform today.

A full hour before showtime, the parking lot of Presleys' is the scene of a slow but deliberate migration: men in faded Levis and trucker hats and women in sparkly sweaters, most of them couples holding hands. A crowd is gathering around a piano in the mezzanine of the lobby, where a man in a headset is performing up-tempo renditions of old hymns. Rows of chairs are filled with theatergoers, ramrod straight and solemn as parishioners, singing old standards such as "This World Is Not My Home" and "The Little Brown Church in the Dale." They give a grateful gasp of recognition at the opening chords of every song.

Perhaps primed from all the hymn-singing, the show itself, with an ensemble cast dressed in matching blue leather and rhinestones, takes off fast and loud, like a hot engine. The show's point of pride is its four generations of performers, from the pretty teenager Ambrus Leigh, who sings a throat-clenching version of a popular country song called "Jesus, Take the Wheel," to patriarch and founding member Lloyd Presley, now 82, who shuffles out briefly, all smiles, for a solo on upright bass.

"We're closer to Broadway than anything," Presley told me, albeit a small-town Broadway with a streak of Ozark hill culture, a mix of old-time music and cornball hillbilly gags with sub-themes of general Christian spirituality and American pride. "There's nothing off-color in Branson," Presley says. "People have tried it, but it didn't work. We call it Bransonizing."

IN ADDITION TO PERFORMERS WHO ARE FROM THE AREA, or who have moved here permanently, there are those for whom, in the latter part of their career, Branson has become a mainstay on their tour schedule. The Oak Ridge Boys, they of the white-gospel-circuit-turned-country-stars, originally formed back in 1943; the current lineup has been around since the early '70s, and they have been playing in Branson in one form or another for more than 40 years. Though they are based in Nashville, for the last 10 years they have played most Wednesday nights during the spring and summer at a theater called the Grand Palace. The Grand Palace, at 4,000 seats, is Branson's -- and, for that matter, Missouri's -- largest live entertainment theater, girded by a vast parking lot that spills down the hill behind the theater.

An hour before the Wednesday night show, the Oak Ridge Boys' tour bus is one of only two or three vehicles in the lot, parked in the lee of the theater, with a panoramic view of the hills. A small knot of people, including one or two of the Oak Ridge Boys and their road manager, are hanging around the bus with an air of relaxed sociability, as though the band were tailgating at its own event.

Lead singer Duane Allen, who is reclining in the front of the bus in a padded swivel chair, wearing a black track suit and white socks, is the band's unofficial businessman. "It's insurance," he says, of their standing gig in Branson. "We do great business here. Every three days, 63,000 new people are coming to Branson, and the biggest day is

Wednesday. We do two shows, and that puts us into our percentages.” The band makes the eight-hour drive to Branson 30 to 35 weeks each year, usually sleeping on the bus, which has 10 televisions and two satellite feeds. “I go to bed, wake up here, do two shows, go to bed and wake up back at home,” Allen says.

The arrangement has the added bonus of what amounts to free nationwide publicity, as audiences brought in en masse by tour buses return to their homes around the country. “We don’t try to make it what it’s not,” he says. “They buy our coffee mugs, and then they go back home, all over the U.S., and when we go to their towns, they come see us.” “Some people come to Branson to retire,” he says contentedly. “We come here to survive.”

In the group of people milling around outside the bus is a middle-age woman with short, dark hair who is standing quietly to one side. Tonight, she tells me, will be her 428th Oak Ridge Boys show. A few minutes before showtime, Allen emerges from the bus in a cloud of cologne and his stage outfit: a black suit, red shirt, pink and red tie, and cowboy boots with the presidential seal on them, which were given to him by George H.W. Bush. He lights up when he sees the woman.

“You want to know what makes Branson special?” he says to me. He disappears back into the bus and brings out a Tupperware container that the woman has brought him, with “Duane” and “Poppysed Almond Cake” written on the lid in black script.

FOR AN OLD-TIME GOSPEL AND COUNTRY GROUP TO DO WELL IN BRANSON IS ONE THING, but what of the other kinds of acts that have hung their shingle here? Russian native Yakov Smirnoff, perhaps the most unlikely full-time resident of Branson, built his theater there in 1992. Smirnoff, 56, says he was forced to reevaluate his career at the conclusion of the Cold War.

“When I first heard about Branson,” he says, “I thought, who would want to live there?” But when he visited, he was impressed by Andy Williams’s theater and its sold-out crowd, as well as its physical and ideological distance from Los Angeles. In 1991, he moved here with his two young children from Los Angeles, where they had lived in a multimillion-dollar home next to Tom Hanks, and began to develop a new act. Branson, he found, was an unlikely influence. “Nobody plays dirty in this town,” he says. “Everybody’s very self-preserving. I haven’t locked my car in 14 years. You leave stuff out, and people will find you and bring it to you.

“If I had a theater in Las Vegas or Atlantic City, I would be dependent on those guys to pay me. Here, you can have your own theater. It’s very much like the Wild West. Anyone can come here and open up shop.

“After coming to America,” he says, “this is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Fourteen years of performing for audiences in Branson and personal events, such as his divorce, have had their effect on his act, which he now describes as emphasizing “God

and country and family.” Branson also seems to have given him the time for philosophic reflection on the nature of his work. Two years ago, he received a graduate degree in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. Now the second half of his act, he says, is “where my passion is, relationships between men and women. That’s the Cold War that really needs attention.” His audiences in Branson, he says, which he calls “middle America, an incredible pool of people ready for new information” have prompted his new, introspective material.

Smirnoff’s show is on the outskirts of town in the Yakov Smirnoff Theatre, where his mother, who emigrated along with Smirnoff and his father in 1977, works in the gift shop. The show is Bransonized in many of the standard ways. There is the jocular rube, Slim Chance (the slapstick comic David Hirschi), whose act includes making his cheeks flap in the jet of air from a leaf blower. The national anthem is sung live at the beginning of the show, and Smirnoff’s jacket is studded with rhinestones, with a rhinestone as big as the Hope Diamond at the neck. Later, he pulls off a fur hat and brocade jacket to reveal a plaid shirt and orange baseball cap for the up-tempo ditty “From Red to Redneck.”

In the last part of the show, Smirnoff delivers a monologue on the kindness of Americans. He tells the story of his arrival with his parents in New York City, and of their first landlord, 79-year-old Mrs. Landau, who paid most of the family’s rent so they could afford their first apartment. On Christmas, she showed up at their door accompanied by the tenants of the building, who were laden with dishes and linens and food, “things we did not have and desperately needed.” Smirnoff leavens the pathos (“They gave us a waffle iron. None of us knew what it was; my mom ruined two pairs of my pants”), but he doesn’t get through it without choking up, and neither does the audience.

Seeing this performance, in which Smirnoff is dressed in an eye-catching but slightly frumpy and decidedly un-Hollywood, tab-collar, gold lamé blouse and is honking into a handkerchief, it is possible to understand the other part of Bransonizing, which has less to do with a formulaic content and more to do with a certain ungilded sincerity. So what if Smirnoff cranks himself into this emotional state for every performance? This is show business.

Smirnoff’s act is by far the most patriotic of the ones I see in Branson, but it is old-fashioned, moral patriotism rather than political, and the audience’s response is palpable. As Smirnoff begins to unravel onstage, the audience registers a series of reactions: surprise, sympathy and, finally, appreciation. Here, it seems, as in most of the shows I see, an audience’s role is to show up with a straightforward world view, and the performers’ role is to confirm it.

As Branson’s entertainment scene gains more momentum, and larger, more powerful interests begin playing a part in its development, no doubt the nature of its brand will shift, bringing with it a broader definition of “good, clean fun.” Those encouraging its development are aware of this -- “We joke about the Eminem Family Theater,” Dan Lennon says -- but he predicts that within three to four years, Branson will be attracting

big pop acts, and will no longer be the enclave of slightly dusty yet still kicking old-timers. If this is true, what will happen to the delicate ecosystem of performer and entertainer in Branson? Which side will change?

At the end of the performance, which concludes with Smirnoff waltzing with a woman dressed up as the Statue of Liberty, the audience gives him a standing ovation. In the lobby, people line up 100 deep to meet him. Smirnoff poses for picture after picture, his arms around the families and the senior citizens of middle America.

“What people say to me most often,” he tells me afterward, “is, ‘Thank you for helping us see how lucky we are.’ “