

# Gruene grows the music



You can't miss Gruene Hall when you come into Gruene. The town, founded just north of New Braunfels by Henry D. Gruene in 1872, consists mostly of a cluster of historic buildings and new resorts along the Guadalupe River.

By RONA DISTENFELD

"Well look at this crowd. Y'all are gonna make some room here so folks can dance, aren't you? This is a dance hall, you know."

Before he's played a note, Gary P. Nunn addresses the fans packing Gruene (pronounced GREEN) Hall, reminding them that they're in the oldest continuously operating dance hall in Texas and he wants to see them dancing. It takes a few songs to get them moving, but then the music and the atmosphere take hold and the onlookers move aside to make space for couples to two-step on the old wooden floor.

"That old dance floor has a few wobbles," says Nunn, "but it's just part of the charm."

Gruene Hall has been the social center of the area since the 1870s. Elections, graduations, weddings, town meetings, and even badger fights were held here, but on Saturday nights there was always a dance.

Over the years many musical legends have played here, including Lyle Lovett, Patsy Montana, Little Richard, the Dixie Chicks, Ernest Tubb, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bo Diddley, Garth Brooks, and Willie Nelson. The Ace in the Hole Band was a weekly fixture for years before the lead singer finally got Nashville to take notice.

Folks in Gruene noticed, including Texas swing icon Ray Benson, leader of Asleep at the Wheel. "We've been playing Gruene Hall since 1976," recalls Benson. "So one day I'm sitting on the bus before we play and I hear the opening band and they sound pretty good. I asked who they were." Today, of course, everyone who listens to country music knows George Strait.

## Loved by the Players

Benson is one of the many musicians who has a soft spot for Gruene Hall. He paints a vivid picture of the role these dance halls played a century ago, and believes that they were instrumental in making Texas music what it is today. "There is great music in Texas because there were always great places to play," says Benson.

"We came to Texas in 1973. Back then there were a lot of places like Gruene Hall, and we played a lot of little halls in south Texas. Gruene is one of the few they were able to save."

"Gruene Hall is what we're all about," Benson continues. "We draw our music and our inspiration from that era. Playing here just feels right."

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The crowd welcomes Gary P. Nunn to Gruene Hall.



Kelly Willis sings her heart out for her fans.

Nunn agrees. "I like these old German dance halls that were centers for the original settlements," he says. "It's where people had their weddings and events, and Gruene Hall is carrying on that tradition. There are always kids running around, and young people courting and sparking, and grandma and grandpa are dancing."

At more than one show a young man has whispered in Nunn's ear, gotten up on the stage, and proposed to his girl. Nunn loves it. "Ask me to name my favorite places to play and it's right at the top."

Singer/songwriter Kelly Willis agrees. "Gruene Hall is the quintessential Texas dance hall experience," she says. "I really love it. You're just right there with everyone. There are no dressing rooms and

people are right up at the stage, right in front of you. In the summer it can get really hot and you sweat so much. It makes me feel like Mick Jagger."

She remembers her first time playing Gruene. "We were in the front room, and it was winter. They had this wood stove, but it was really cold so we kept warming our hands by the stove. I'm not from Texas, and I had never seen anyplace like Gruene Hall."

Now she's a regular attraction, playing the hall several times a year and always drawing a full house of fans.

#### Loved by the Locals

While music lovers regularly visit Gruene from all over the state, and the rest



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While music lovers regularly visit Gruene from all over the state, and the rest of the world, the locals still call it their own. They gather in the front room every day of the week for a beer, a visit with friends, and a chance to catch up on the news.

A group of ladies known as the "Stitch n' Bitch Club" is typical. They meet by design every Wednesday and Friday, although it's not unusual to find them here other days as well. None live in Gruene, but all live around it.

Ann, Cherie, Nancy, Sharon and B.J. met each other here over the years. Nancy used to tend bar here, and even met her husband here. B.J. got married in Gruene Hall on Christmas Eve. And every year the group gets its picture taken in front of the Gruene Hall Christmas tree.

They have many fond memories. "My husband and I got to drive Kris Kristoferson and Bo Diddley when they played here," says Cherie. "We were always sober enough to show up, so we got the job. And we got to meet John Travolta when he was here."

Travolta filmed part of "Michael" here in 1996. Screenwriter Nora Ephron said that when she walked in the door of Gruene Hall it was exactly what she pictured when she wrote the scenes.

The ladies also remember when Lyle Lovett would sit in a corner of the front room and play and Hal Ketchum would come in for a drink. "We've been spoiled by Gruene Hall," says Cherie. "When we're here we feel like we're home with our friends."

#### More Than Country

Owners Mary Jane Neeley and Pat Molak bought Gruene Hall from its previous owners in 1974 because they wanted to own a dance hall, but they've expanded the musical genre from traditional country dance music to a wider range of Americana. Artists like Nickel Creek, Raul Malo, Arlo Guthrie, and John Prine have found a welcome at Gruene Hall.

"I'd say that these days about 20% of the bands we book are Texas country swing music," says Neeley. "We never slotted it for anything specific. In fact, when we started most of the bands we could get were playing what I called red neck rock. We like bands that play songs that tell stories about people, things you can understand and relate to."

Gruene Hall will continue to be a place where everyone is welcome, and it's as normal to see bathing suits and flip flops as Wranglers and boots. The music may change, but people will keep coming to relax and have fun.



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