



• **FAITH:** Central Church of Christ is still considering its options after fire gutted its building.

Story ideas? Comments?
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my LITTLE NASHVILLE OPRY

Bands, fans, friends of Brown County concert venue mourn its loss to arson

I will never be at the Little Nashville Opry again. That realization dropped me to my knees Sept. 19, the night the Opry was destroyed by fire. Since the blaze, the public has been inundated with information about mismanagement and scandal. However, the legacy the Opry left me, a part-time employee there since 2007, is an entirely different story.



JOANNA KAI COBB

Guest columnist

and said, "Just tell them you work at the Little Nashville Opry."
"But I don't, really," I answered.
She replied, "That check in your hand says otherwise."

Opry opportunities

The Opry was the trunk of a large tree of opportunity for me. I was able to meet some of the stars of the Opry Saturday Night series as they relaxed before shows in what I thought of as "my" green dressing room. I suddenly found myself, with Opry recommendation, singing in other venues across Indiana and Kentucky, making lasting friendships with audience members, house employees and other performers. Without the Opry, I never would have met those people, some of whom I now consider dear friends.
However, "home base" was always the Little Nashville Opry, and it was always good to be home.

Halloween at the Opry

My favorite show at the Opry took place on Halloween night in 2008. Because Halloween fell on a Friday, we all decided to don costumes for the show. With the excitement of school children, we selected and pieced together our own costumes, some of us from scratch.
Our shows were always lighthearted and fun, but the Halloween show was memorable because of its extra shot of silliness. How can you not laugh when Frisch's Big Boy is playing bass? By the end of the night, many of us had exchanged costume pieces, and we were a hilarious, hodge-podge mess of Friday Night Opry fun.

Last night

One week before the fire, though I was not booked to perform, I felt a calling to go to the Friday Night Opry. I watched most of the show from the audience, but spent breaks backstage, interacting with my friends and making plans for my next scheduled appearance. Before I left, I made sure to hug everyone at the backstage door; it proved to be my last action at the Opry.
On the day after the fire, with tears and rain streaming down my face, I stared at the spot where the backstage door had been, finally understanding why I had felt the urge to unexpectedly attend the Opry just one week before.

The future

Losing the Little Nashville Opry has been difficult for everyone who worked there. I personally feel a sense of loss that is akin to losing a family member. However, plans for the future are already taking shape.
On our first Friday without a home — a night when I had been scheduled to perform — I met with the LN Express in the Opry's overflow parking lot to laugh, cry, and plan for the future. The LN Express is certainly "the little band that could." Though the flames burned their home and equipment, their spirit remains intact, evidenced by their plans to stay together and play together.

The real Opry

The impact the Opry had on me is evident by my memories. When I close my eyes, I don't see myself performing there. I see myself in that gaudy green dressing room, practicing lyrics. I see myself talking to audience members, appreciating their support. I see myself thanking Shirley Phillips, one of the owners of the Opry's Candy Emporium, for a free piece of peanut butter fudge. But most of all, I see the smiling, welcoming faces of the LN Express accepting me into their family.
The Little Nashville Opry's wooden walls were indeed destroyed Sept. 19. However, I learned that the real Opry is formed by the people in whose hearts the spirit of making music, fun, and friends resides. The real Opry — my Opry — can never be destroyed.

JoAnna Kai Cobb of Bedford is a frequent contributor to the Times-Mail.

From the audience

"I took my 80-year-old father to see Lee Greenwood. When Lee sang 'Proud to be An American,' he asked all of the veterans to stand. My Dad was so proud. He served at Omaha/Normandy Beach. I cried seeing him standing there. He passed on two years later."

— Carla Leighty Hamilton

"For me, seeing George Jones, who is my absolute idol, is my favorite Little Opry memory. I'd been there before to see other artists, but nothing compares to seeing someone you've wanted to see your entire life. I took my parents, Fred and Sarah Norman, and my friend Shelia Bell's mom, Rosalee Hammond, and we had a great time."

— Shelley D. Smith

From the stage

"The Wray Brothers did a concert with J.D. Sumner and The Stamps one night and had a great time. There were about 1,500 people there that night, so it wasn't a sell-out, but the crowd was overly enthusiastic. ...

"Now, when J.D. is leading the stage, you had better be prepared for anything. He told the crowd that we were all gonna sing 'Rock of Ages,' and that was fine. He then leaned over to me and said, 'You, boy, are gonna sing the second verse and all of us will "ooh" and "ah" behind you as backup.' I told him I did not know all of the second verse. He said, 'I will whisper it to you in your ear.' Now, to get an understanding of J.D., his whispering technique is like the sound of a ship's foghorn. The whole crowd could hear him whisper that second verse to me, and the crowd ate it up. ... The memories that I have from there are priceless."

— Joe Wray



Courtesy photos
ABOVE: "The Green Room," the dressing room Cobb claimed each week.

AT LEFT: A charred scrap of wallpaper from that room. Everything else is gone.

Humble beginning

Two years ago, I entered the annual Little Nashville Opry Talent Contest. On that fall day, my first steps into the Opry were taken with uncomfortable anticipation. Memorabilia of country music's biggest stars surrounded me, and I could hear the muffled sound of the house band, the Little Nashville Express, rehearsing in the auditorium. I was soon whisked through the backstage area, where I caught rushed glimpses of the famous walls, signed by major recording artists.

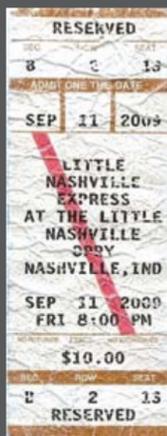
I am way out of my league, I thought.
When I entered the center stage door into the spotlight, I saw the members of the LN Express for the first time. They appeared professional, but friendly, and I was immediately at ease. I finished third in the contest, earning a spot as a one-time Friday Night Opry guest.

Rising amateur

The night of my first guest appearance at the Opry, I was led to a large, well-furnished dressing room with garish green wallpaper. I learned later that all Opry dressing rooms boasted their original 1975 décor. I was also able to spend more time gazing in awe at the history on the backstage signature walls: Brenda Lee, Leroy Van Dyke and even Bob Knight were among the famous names there.

Still feeling like an amateur among professionals, I ascended the stage stairs to rehearse with the LN Express. They could sense my apprehension, and helped calm me by giving me tips about performing as a guest. Their warmth eradicated my feelings of inadequacy. The encouragement of the band, coupled with support from my friends and family in attendance, helped me find my performing rhythm.

After a high-energy show, I was asked to become a regular Friday Night Opry guest. Jean Ann Birkle, the keyboardist with the band, also asked if I would be interested in singing at other venues. She suggested a few places



Cobb's ticket for the final show she attended, one week before the fire.

BENEFIT FOR MUSICIANS

SCOTTSBURG — The Little Nashville Express band lost instruments, equipment, clothes and charts in the fire, as well as their jobs.

The Ross Country Jamboree in Scottsburg is hosting a benefit for the musicians at 8 p.m. Oct. 23. The event will feature the LN Express and three guests: Kim Kinman of the Kinmans, Mike Fryman of Louisville and JoAnna Cobb of Bedford.

Tickets are \$10, and all proceeds will go to the band to compensate for their equipment loss.

Reserve tickets by calling (866) 573-ROSS (7677) and leaving a phone number for a return call if no one answers. The 430-seat venue is expected to sell out.



Jim Allen and Brad Magness

Guitars

Curt Edwards

Drums



Little Nashville Express:

Jean Ann Birkle
Keyboards



Mark Holler
Bass



Dave Jackson
Steel guitar



Tammy Sue Hogan and Ronna Bemis

Vocals



Gordon Lowry
Fiddle

THE BAND