

# Legacy in the Making

THE BLUEBIRD  
CAFE

In 1982, The Bluebird Cafe opened its doors and evolved, quickly, from being just another place to eat in Nashville, Tennessee, to being one of the world's premier listening rooms for emerging and established country songwriters. While The Bluebird holds only 100 people, its iconic appeal, over more than 30 years, persists as far bigger than its seating capacity. Recently, the Legacy Lab spoke with **Amy Kurland**, the founder of The Bluebird Cafe, to learn about how she transformed her personal passion into a famous and still-vital business, recounting not only her brand's legacy, but also its legacy in the making.



My guitar-playing boyfriend and his friends said, 'Why don't you put in a stage, and we'll put music in there?' And so, that's what I did. It was no more than the first fun idea of a young person. But of course, the minute the money had gone to the bank and the keys were in the door, I got really serious about my passion. I didn't want to fail. I didn't want to waste the money. I wanted to get good at this. I had to stop kidding around.

**The Bluebird is famous for a few things, especially the Writers' Night and playing 'In the Round.' How did those things begin?**

■ One night, maybe three or four months in, a friend who was booking the music brought in a Writers' Night. I didn't even know what it was. But we did this Writers' Night. It was a benefit show, and when I arrived the room was full. Everybody was listening attentively. You could've heard a pin drop in there. The next morning, when I went to ring out the cash register, it was the most money I'd made to date. All I thought was, 'Writers' Night. Let's do more Writers' Nights.' That wasn't some brilliance on my part. That was just grace, happenstance and serendipity that came together, and I was

**Tell us the origin story of The Bluebird Cafe. Did you have a sense of what it would become, or were you just following a passion?**

■ I started with a passion, but it wasn't strictly for songwriters or music. It was initially a passion for hanging out in

bars, eating food and being with guys who played the guitar. I was just out of college, and I wanted to open a restaurant. I was dating a guitar player, and we liked to go out and drink in music clubs. So with a small inheritance from my grandmother, and an unwillingness to get a real job, I opened a restaurant.

able to pay attention to it and make it happen. Over the next few years, I phased out the lunch business and added a second show every night, and started thinking in terms of one show for the up-and-coming songwriters and one show for successful songwriters. We started providing space for people who were brand-new to Nashville to come in to play and get a start, and for people who have had success to celebrate and share their music.

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Another miraculous thing that happened, songwriters Thom Schuyler, Fred Knobloch and Don Schlitz had a wonderful idea about setting up in the middle of the room to perform, almost as if you had a party and everybody would be around you. They would call it ‘In the Round.’ A few weeks later, we tried it and it was this incredible, intimate moment of audience and musicians

all sharing in a way that is less performance than it is community. And over the years, we did more and more of those ‘In the Round’ performances. The music is the thing that makes The Bluebird perfect.

**What was the key to making The Bluebird what it is today? How did you foster that success?**

■ I absolutely think it starts with the musicians.

At the time, and probably today also, if you had a garage in the worst part of town and you put a sign on it that said we have a songwriters’ night, you’d have lots of songwriters lined up to play because they need a place to play. And there may not be as much of the general public there to begin with as there are other songwriters to cheer on their friends or, you know, their mothers or their babysitters or their dog walkers. People who are interested in those people, and who are part of the community where songwriters meet each other, find cowriters, find girlfriends, find somebody to have Thanksgiving dinner with. Songwriters tend to be people from out of town—nomadic people who just moved to Nashville. They’re really looking for a place they can connect to and feel at home, and The Bluebird provided that. The audience grows with them and follows them.

I would say another key thing, and I can’t take all the credit for this, is that the people who would come to The Bluebird really came to listen to

the music. If somebody was talking, the audience would turn around and tell them to shush. We took on ‘shush,’ capital SHHH and an exclamation point basically as our motto.

We are a listening room. The Bluebird is much less interested in selling maximum numbers of drinks than it is in making sure the musicians are listened to. It is probably the most important thing that The Bluebird does.

**Do you have any favorite stories of musicians who materialized into something exceptional?**

■ There were so many over the years. Artists like Vince Gill, Kathy Mattea, Dierks Bentley, Keith Urban, Taylor Swift and Lady Antebellum all got their start at The Bluebird. However, one story in particular jumps to the top: Garth Brooks auditioned in 1987. He had been in Nashville, scared off and turned down by the labels, moved home to Oklahoma then turned around and came back and auditioned at The Bluebird. I didn’t know who he was, but I gave him the highest score I have ever given anybody for the audition. I don’t remember the title of the song. I do know it was about putting a woman on a pedestal, and I thought it was lovely and he had tremendous presentation. He just had that charisma. That was just his audition, just one minute of one song.

When Garth came back to play, he got a standing ovation at the end of his first song. Generally, people get

to play three songs at the Writers' Night, and if they get a warm round of applause at the end of the three songs, they've done well. A few months after that, he came back to play a showcase that the Nashville Entertainment Association was putting on, and the record label that had already turned him down, Capitol Records, was there in person and then they got it. I mean, they grabbed him and took him down the back hall and made him agree to sign a record deal with them right there. Garth Brooks is a tremendous talent, and he didn't need The Bluebird to get famous, except that he needed to be seen in person in a setting where people were really listening.

**Can you describe a bit of the journey of what The Bluebird became for you from when you opened it to when you sold it?**

■ It was truly miraculous and meant to be. The only thing I had to do was pay close attention and be willing to work really hard to make it happen. My story is that I went into business not knowing what the hell I was doing. I had worked in restaurants but had no business background, and I was lucky to run into an advisor who said there is no shame in going back to school even once you're in business. So, I went back to the local community college and took night classes twice a week after I'd worked all day. The one that impacted me the most was a marketing class where I learned you have to be one thing. You can't be everything to everybody.

You have to think about what you do best, what you enjoy the most and what is the most meaningful thing to you. My father was a musician, and I am a very poor piano player, but I love music. To be able to be involved in making music even though the music isn't coming out of me, to be able to participate in the creativity just by providing the base for it, I mean, what an honor and a thrill that is for me.

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One of the songbooks I love to play is Carole King's *Tapestry*. I have the piano music to that, and I can thump out a version of those songs that only I would recognize. But then one night, Carole King was in The Bluebird playing those songs right next to me, and she was encouraging the audience to sing along, and I got to have that experience of making music with Carole King. It was a real incredible gift to have been able to do that.

**Did you have a vision for the legacy you wanted to leave behind? Was it something you were actively thinking about?**

■ It came down to the big picture, especially when I started thinking about selling it. I knew I wanted this place to exist long after I was gone. The Bluebird has become part of the fabric of Nashville, and really part of the process for artists and songwriters to get started in Nashville. It would be a tragedy, maybe even a disaster, if there wasn't The Bluebird for people to come to. Because as open as Nashville is to musicians and songwriters, a lot of doors are shut. And when you first get in, get out of your car, get off the bus, you've got to find a place where you can walk in and start playing. The Bluebird is one of those live music venues, a listening room, where the doors are open.

When I decided after 25 years I was tired of the harder parts of running a venue—fixing the ice machine and taking care of the plumbing, which was my job too—I started to think, “How could this go on after me?” I couldn't sell it to an individual or even a big business because there is far more money in running a sports bar than running a listening room, I promise you that. Then it just came to me: I'll give it to the Nashville Songwriters Association. I had been working with them forever. They had basically the same mission as The Bluebird. It took a year for them to shepherd me through the process. They insisted on paying something for it, and a woman who works at the

Songwriters Association is now the executive director of The Bluebird. She had been a waitress at The Bluebird, a bartender at The Bluebird, had been involved in our marketing process, and so we have the same vision. That's terrific for me.

**What's your sense of some of the changes? How do you feel seeing The Bluebird on the TV show Nashville?**

■ The Bluebird is twice as big now as it was when I was there, mostly because of the TV show *Nashville*. In my day, The Bluebird would sell out every Friday and Saturday night show, and maybe a couple shows during the week. The Bluebird, these days, sells out every single show with a waiting list of 100 or more for each show.

I couldn't be more thrilled with being part of that show and, in general, with the way The Bluebird is represented. The Bluebird is a character in the show and with all the crazy, dramatic things that happen, whenever they want to get back to the heart and the soul and the reason why people do this, they put a song in The Bluebird, and I love that.

**There's such demand, but it's maintained its 100-seat venue. Was expanding the space considered, or is the 100-seat space part of the magic, so to speak?**

■ It's very important to musicians to feel like they're playing to a good audience. It may not be a

sellout night, but the way we supported those musicians was making them feel like they were having a good night. City Winery recently moved to Nashville with probably a 300-seat venue. It's got good sound and sight lines, but you couldn't put a 'nobody' in there because it would feel like they're playing to an empty warehouse, and that's not what The Bluebird is about. The Bluebird is really a place for people to get that start in their career, be heard and be discovered. The Bluebird would never be the same if the only people who could play there were already successful.

Maybe if we could buy the next-door neighbor's space and keep it in the same location, and create a way to make it larger, so that nobody would notice. There would be nothing wrong with having 120 seats or 130 seats. The thing is to make it feel like you're never more than three rows away from the musician. If you get much bigger than that, you're going to lose the ability to keep people quiet. In general, I think that when songwriters play in a room that is that size where nobody is far away from them, people are naturally going to listen. You know, once you get inside The Bluebird, you're not going to be able to talk. Somebody tried to make a reservation for a bachelorette party. We wouldn't take the reservation unless they agreed very clearly that listening is what they were coming there for.

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**What are some things you got right, whether by divine intervention or serendipity, when you created this thing?**

■ Number one on my list was doing 'In the Round.' When Thom, Fred and Don came in and said they wanted to do this 'In the Round' thing, it was Sunday night and we were all drinking heavily. I was the only one who woke up Monday morning and asked, 'Did you mean it?' They might've all forgotten about it. I really honored those guys for about two years. They were the only act that I allowed to do it that way. Eventually, we opened it up to another act by a group of women and called it 'The Women In the

Round,' one of whom was Pam Tillis, who went on to a great country music career.

The Bluebird made a big effort for those who play 'In the Round.' We do not just pick four random songwriters and put them up on stage together and say, 'Go play.' The people who play 'In the Round' have to know each other, know each other's material, like each other, write together. There has to be something more to that relationship than just ending up on the same stage on the same night.

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One of the other things that I determined was that the audience I needed to be appealing to most was not the people who came to listen. The audience I needed to appeal to was the writers and musicians. If I got the right writers and musicians to come play there, the audiences would follow them. The Bluebird is small. They can't make the most money there. It doesn't have a greenroom, and we don't have a fruit basket for them, but we gave

those musicians and songwriters the two things they wanted the most in the world. One was to be listened to, and the second was to have a chance for their performance to perhaps carry them to the next level.

### **What would you say is the most surprising thing for new generations of fans just now discovering The Bluebird?**

■ Until the TV show, the most surprising thing to people always was how small it is. They've heard so much about it, and they expect it to be big and glamorous, and it's quite small. The other thing that might be surprising to someone from out of town is that it's not in downtown Nashville. It's in the suburbs, not far from Music Row, but it's not in the thick of things. But I think the most surprising thing is, you may think you don't like country music, but if you sit down at The Bluebird, you will love it. I can't tell you how many people have said to me, 'I never did like country music before I came to The Bluebird, but once I heard it in this format where somebody told me why they were singing about their dog and their truck and their girlfriend, suddenly it became real to me.' That's terrific because people who hear this music are just captivated by it, and suddenly, they care about who the songwriters are, and they start listening to country music itself with a different ear. That's also great because part of the mission of The Bluebird, and of the songwriters' community in general, is to spread the word about songwriters, spread the word about country music.

*At the age of 33, The Bluebird Cafe remains as vital as it's ever been. The small, albeit intimate, listening room is regularly featured on the hit television show Nashville, its live shows are always sold out, and new generations of fans from around the world are discovering a real passion for the country music genre via The Bluebird's very big reach.*

*Whether by design, divine intervention or serendipity, or maybe all of the above, The Bluebird Cafe succeeds by mobilizing a community of songwriters with a passion to be heard and, in turn, finding a large audience with a real love for listening to their songs. The Bluebird elevates the live format from one that separates performers from the audience, to one that surrounds musicians with listeners. And it even authored some of the rules of its live shows specifically around some of the rules suggested by its audience: embracing quietness to give the performers the entire room to fill with sound. Even as the brand's founder passed the experience forward, she made sure to entrust its modern legacy to an organization, the Nashville Songwriters Association International, that shares her same sense of purpose: making sure that The Bluebird's history would continue to be written every day.*

BY MARK MILLER

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