

Nashville East:

Manville has become an East Coast focal point for country music fans

By WILLIAM WESTHOVEN
WeekendPlus Editor

Face it, all you sophisticated, metropolitan cosmopolitans. Country music has not only crossed the Mason-Dixon line; it's actually hip. Cling if you will to faded images of Tennessee Ernie Ford and his mountain twang; of Deliverance and moonshiners keeping rhythm by tootin' a jug; of Kitty Wells, Loretta Lynn and the rest of the "higher the hair, the nearer to God" crowd. Today's country music is lean, mean and it's filling dance floors large enough to play football on.

Particularly in Manville. Or is that Nashville East?

Yes, Manville, which is developing a reputation as one of the most active country music hotbeds this side of Branson, Missouri.

Country music came to Manville about seven years ago, when a former roller rink was converted into the Yellow Rose, a genuine country western dance hall and a magnet for country fans from all over the Garden State and beyond.

Even last weekend's horrible weather couldn't keep the faithful away. Friday night was understandably a little light, but by early Saturday evening, the parking lot was full.

"On a typical Saturday night, our doors are closed by about 9:45 p.m., and after that, it's in-and-out," said Ron Rhodes, a resident of Manville who has managed the Yellow Rose, located at 729-731 South Main Street, for the past six years. "Sometimes sooner."

A combination of events helped to make the Yellow Rose a thriving business. First and foremost, the owners had experience in the country music field, and knew what country fans wanted.

"They chose this building because it had a 3,200 square-foot dance floor," said Rhodes. "That's what country music people look for, a good dance floor. And this one was designed as a dance floor — it's all

wood and low impact, very easy on the feet."

"The big dance floor is the thing," said Jon Madsen of Griggstown, a Yellow Rose regular. "I've been to country places all over the country. It's a real nice dance floor. All the bands might not be as good as they are in, say, Texas, but a lot of them are real good. And I've been coming here three times a week since it's been open, and I've only seen two fights. That's pretty good, don't you think?"

Rhodes runs a clean, tight ship. The security is low-key but clearly present, which helps the atmosphere remain warm and friendly. Generously-spaced tables surround the perimeter of the square dance floor, which is clearly the center of attention. At one end of the dance floor is a DJ booth. At the other end in the far corner is a stage for live bands, which is visible from nearly everywhere, but closest to the dancers, who line dance as a group of two-step as couples, many adorned in fashionable western garb. And, of course, the requisite Stetsons and cowboy hats and boots.

It's not all that different from a disco, and not surprisingly, many people who used to frequent discos have made the conversion. The closing, in fact, of many dance clubs, and some of the older country clubs damaged by the recession, helped bring in that many more folks to the Yellow Rose.

The "New Wave" of modern country performers like Garth Brooks and Lyle Lovett is another factor in the club's success, as is Billboard magazine's newer, more-accurate method of counting record sales that has supported the long-standing belief that country records have been selling better

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**Patti Krause
Wilbraham, Ma.**

than many believed. "Business was very good when we first opened, but with the coming of the new wave a couple of years ago, that's when things really took off," said Rhodes. "At the same time, there were a lot of rock clubs closing down, and we brought a lot of those people in, too." Acknowledging the average country music fan's feverish affinity for dancing, the Yellow Rose offers dance lessons Tuesday-Thursday evenings, and also offers a "family night" along with dance lessons on Sunday. Friday and Saturday, however, the dance floor is dominated by dancers who are entertainment in themselves for anyone who hasn't seen them. Country music in Manville, though, isn't limited to the Yellow Rose. Sidewinders (140 Falcon Road) offers country music and dancing six nights a week, as does the Yellow Rose. The V.F.W. Hall on Washington Avenue used to host country music shows for the Country Music Association as often as twice a week, but they stopped after



GEORGE PACCELLO/WEKENDPLUS

Line dancers enjoy the spacious dance floor at the Yellow Rose in Manville.

Christmas.

"There's a lot of places offering country music these days, but the only places that really seem to do it right are the ones who do it full-time," said M.D. Blessing (see sidebar), a popular country performer from Westchester County who plays many clubs up and down the east coast.

Still more clubs, restaurants and hotels are bowing to the will of the masses by offering country music and dancing on a regular or semi-regular basis. If you want to get your feet wet at a local country music night, go right ahead. But be warned, sooner or later, if you catch the fever, prepare to end up in Manville.

"This is our first time here," said Steve Vesce of Long Valley, who made the 40-minute trek down to Manville with his wife, Pamela, and some friends. "We like country music, but the real reason we came here was my sister-in-law came down here from Massachusetts for the express purpose of coming to the Yellow Rose."

"I go to the Cactus Club in Manchester," said Vesce's sister-in-law, Patti Krause of Wilbraham, Ma. "We heard about the Yellow Rose up there and heard it had one of the largest dance floors around. We've been to a lot of modern country places, but it's not the same. This is nicer, it's more countrified."

How 'bout that? Manville. Go figure.

Rising country star counting his Blessings

M.D. Blessing was born in Bloombury, New Jersey, but his family moved south when he was still a boy.

Many years later, as a struggling country music performer, he fielded what he considered a wild suggestion from his Westchester County agent.

"He said, 'Why not come up and play around here for a while,'" said Blessing, who still had family in the Tri-State area as well. "I said to him, 'There is no country music scene up there.' He just said, 'Wanna bet?'"

He called his agent's bluff, but as he found out, it was no bluff. Now, 18 months later, M.D. Blessing and the Prophets of Swing have as many bookings as they can handle, in clubs larger than they could imagine, and a

reputation that has earned a deal with Nashville-based Lodestar Records, a record coming out this spring and a completed video for their first single, "Cheri."

Of course, with a new record comes new responsibilities, and the band will spend the summer touring the south and west, but no matter how big he gets, Blessing promises to return to his newfound home base.

"We don't want to stay away too long, because this is where our friends are, and our fans have been just great. This area has been very good to us."

Blessing, who describes his blend of original and traditional country favorites as "Hillbilly Soul," plays all the

big country spots from upstate New York and Connecticut down to Philadelphia. "There's the Yellow Rose in Manville, the Silver Rose down in West Deptford and the Midnight Rose in Quakertown (Pa.)," said Blessing. "A lot of roses. I even hired a guy once to play with us at the Yellow Rose, but he went to the wrong rose. It gets confusing."

As for Manville, Blessing cites its strategic location as one reason the clubs here have been so successful.

"South Jersey is a little healthier for country music overall, but Manville is the center of country music in New Jersey. It's right off the highway and you can get there from the Outerbridge Crossing in 20 minutes."

In addition to all the "Roses," Blessing also cited the Palamino Club in Wallington and, of course, Sidewinders in Manville, as places committed to country music. And by and large, it's those full-time halls that he feels are the best.

"Just about every other place is part-time, and country music fans are creatures of habit. When they find a place they like, they stick to it," he said. "To open a club takes time and money, so if you're going to open a country music club, you have to love it. If you can't make up your mind whether to book country music or hot-oil wrestling, you might as well stick to hot-oil wrestling."

—William Westhoven



M.D. BLESSING