LONG LIVE THE LAUREL

A Knoxville institution keeps playing on

by Brittany Norvell



There are easier places in Knoxville to stumble into than the Laurel Theater. It does not sit beneath a glowing marquee on Gay Street, with restaurants and bars funneling people toward its doors.

Tucked into Fort Sanders at 1538 Laurel Ave., the Laurel is the sort of place you generally arrive at because you meant to. Inside, roughly 200 people can sit close enough to a musician to hear the room settle before a song. On other nights, the chairs move, people dance, instruments come out for jams and students learn tunes that existed long before Spotify playlists, TikTok algorithms or most of the buildings now rising around them.

For Evie Andrus, who works with the Laurel Theater and Jubilee Community Arts, that intimacy is not a limitation. It's the point.

"We're a listening room," she says. "We're not a bar that happens to have music. We're not a huge theater. We are a small, intimate room where you can really feel like you're with the performer."

The room has been doing some version of that for generations. The former Fort Sanders Presbyterian Church was built in the late 19th century and eventually became part of an ecumenical ministry that helped turn the space into a gathering place for arts, music and community activism. Jubilee Community Arts began presenting traditional arts in Knoxville in 1969 and today owns and operates the Laurel as a regional cultural center devoted to preserving and presenting the traditional arts of the Southern Appalachians.

Preservation can be a deceptive word. It suggests putting something behind glass, labeling it and admiring it from a respectful distance. Andrus describes something much more alive.

"Every so often, there's this huge surge to return to things that feel like home," she says. "I think we're currently in one of those surges."

Traditional and folk music, she believes, offer something people are increasingly looking for in a world built around constant digital connection but often short on the real thing. The Laurel's job is not simply to keep old songs alive. It is to make room for the ways those traditions continue to evolve, bringing in established artists alongside performers willing to take old forms in new directions.

The theater's fall season reflects that balance. The calendar includes veteran bluegrass artist Laurie Lewis; musician and scholar Jake Blount; Ben Sollee; Sam Lewis with Angel Snow; Ed Snodderly; Rayna Gellert and Kieran Kane; Thomas Cassell and Tim Stafford; traditional Irish performers; and musicians from the University of Tennessee Appalachian Strings program. For Andrus, it is the combination that matters: respecting tradition without pretending it stopped changing decades ago.

"Bridging that gap and that space is what we do well," she affirms.

The value of a room like the Laurel becomes clearest when Andrus talks about what happens between musicians and the people listening. She remembers an Irish Christmas performance years ago when, near the end of the show, a singer began singing while a guitarist played. The room went nearly silent.

"You could hear a pin drop," Andrus recalls.

Then the audience began to join in. More than 100 voices filled the former sanctuary together, carrying through a room originally designed for people to gather and raise their voices in much the same way. "You had a hundred-some-odd voices joined together in that beautiful acoustic space," Andrus says.

That sort of experience is difficult to reproduce in an arena, and it is also why calling the Laurel simply a concert venue misses much of what happens there. The building is in use throughout the week for social dances, community groups, jams and rehearsals. Its programming includes traditional Southern square dancing and other community events, while Laurel JAM, its Junior Appalachian Musicians program, introduces young people to instruments such as fiddle, banjo and guitar along with the history and culture surrounding the music. The program emphasizes learning by ear, small-group instruction and participation in the musical traditions of the region.

The point is not to remember Appalachian culture as something that used to happen. People are still doing it.

That matters particularly in Fort Sanders, where permanence can feel increasingly hard to come by. The neighborhood surrounding the Laurel continues to grow and change, creating challenges as ordinary as parking and as fundamental as making sure people know the theater exists in the first place. Unlike a downtown venue surrounded by restaurants and foot traffic, the Laurel is somewhere audiences often have to deliberately seek out.

"We're a destination," Andrus says. "You have to kind of seek it out a bit more than just happening upon it."

For a small nonprofit arts organization, word of mouth remains one of its most valuable resources. Andrus credits the theater's volunteers, musicians and longtime supporters with bringing new people through the doors and keeping the Laurel on Knoxville's cultural radar. That reliance on community is not new. In the 1980s, a devastating fire nearly destroyed the theater, and the building was extensively renovated with significant volunteer involvement before reopening. The same building continues to house performances, archives, audio production facilities and Jubilee's offices today.

"To me, it represents Knoxville's history, present and future," Andrus says. "It's one of the few things that has remained."

There is an easy temptation to romanticize places like the Laurel, especially in Appalachia. Old buildings, old fiddles and old songs lend themselves nicely to nostalgia, particularly once people become afraid of losing them. The Laurel offers a more useful definition of preservation. Sometimes it means putting a fiddle into a kid's hands. Sometimes it means clearing the chairs so people can dance. Sometimes it means bringing an artist into a room small enough that an audience can hear the pause before the next song.

As more of daily life moves online, Andrus believes places built around actual human proximity may become more important, not less. "We sometimes get more disconnected from each other," she says. "Places like the Laurel will become more and more important as a community hub for real-life experience."

Plenty of Knoxvillians have probably passed the Laurel hundreds of times without knowing exactly what happens inside. Meanwhile, the musicians keep playing, the dancers keep dancing and an old church in the middle of a changing neighborhood keeps filling with people.

The Laurel has survived fire, redevelopment and generations of change. What keeps it alive is simpler: People still need a place to gather, listen and belong.

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