



## FROM RAGTIME TO ROCK 'N' ROLL, THESE ARTISTS SHAPED MUSIC IN ST. LOUIS—AND EVERYWHERE ELSE, TOO.

**W**e don't get our props when it comes to music. Talk about blues, and people think Beale Street in Memphis or Maxwell Street in Chicago. But Chicago didn't *have* a blues scene in the 1930s. St. Louis did. When all those brilliant musicians moved north, Chicago suddenly had one—and it got all the credit.

Traditionally, St. Louis is where artists have huge creative breakthroughs, or clarify their voice, then move on. Scott Joplin wrote “The Entertainer” here, but died in New York. There are exceptions to this, of course—take Chuck Berry, Nelly, and Jay Farrar—but more often, it's the story of geniuses like Miles Davis, Tina Turner, Jeff Tweedy, and Robert McFerrin taking off for a bigger city like Chicago or New York.

From the advent of ragtime at the turn of the 20th century to hip-hop at the turn of the 21st, though, St. Louis has always profoundly impacted the direction of American music. Even when we weren't innovating, we set a high bar; Willa Mae Ford Smith originated the voice of modern gospel, and singers and wigmasters talk about Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in the green room at the Met. We have been, and continue to be, one of the most amazing music cities in the country. Doubt us? Keep reading. →

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN A. ROBERTS



# TWANG

## UNCLE TUPELO

**W**HEN YOU TALK ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF ALT-COUNTRY, YOU HAVE TO TALK about Uncle Tupelo...and Cicero's Basement Bar. Among the Minutemen- and Meat Puppets-inspired rockers who inhabited the damp subterranean venue in the late '80s and early '90s, a trio of musicians from Belleville, Ill., found a home—and a new sound. Guitarist Jay Farrar, bassist-guitarist Jeff Tweedy, and drummer Mike Heidorn became regulars at Cicero's, melding country influences with post-hardcore underground rock on a series of demos before recording *No Depression*—an album that inspired an eponymous magazine chronicling the alt-country genre—in 1990. (Farrar recorded on the same Gibson guitar Dinosaur Jr.'s J. Mascis played on the album *Bug*.) The band toured extensively for the next three years, opening for Sugar in Europe; its critically acclaimed recordings in those years included 1991's *Still Feel Gone*; an acoustic album, *March 16–20, 1992*, produced by R.E.M.'s Peter Buck; and a major-label debut, *Anodyne*, in 1993. Before the band broke up in 1994, Uncle Tupelo's fluctuating lineup starred musicians who would also play in The Bottle Rockets (guitarist Brian Henneman), Son Volt (Farrar and Heidorn), Wilco (Tweedy, drummer Ken Coomer, guitarist-bassist John Stirratt, and multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston), and Loose Fur and Golden Smog (Tweedy), sowing the seeds of the alt-country scene to come.

### THE BOTTLE ROCKETS

Like Uncle Tupelo, The Bottle Rockets brought together folk-rock and punk influences to earn national acclaim—

one early headline dubbed the group's sound "Buck Owens meets Ramones." Guitarist Brian Henneman, drummer Mark Ortmann, rhythm guitarist Tom Parr, and bassist Tom Ray took a

honky-tonk sensibility and turned it up; recounting the group's progression from its beginnings as a Festus band called Chicken Truck, Henneman told PBS, "We eventually evolved into the Bottle Rockets and went into St. Louis, and nobody told us to turn down; I think everybody is deaf up there. We turned the amps up, and it turned into a whole new thing." That "whole new thing" has spawned 11 albums, inclusion in the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, and comparisons to Woody Guthrie and The Replacements; the band's lineup now includes Keith

Voegele (Phonocaptors) on bass and John Horton (The New Patrons of Husbandry, Rockhouse Ramblers, Kamikaze Cowboy, Magnolia Summer) on guitar.

### JOHN HARTFORD

By the time he graduated from John Burroughs School, John Hartford had worked on the Mississippi River, become a standout fiddler, banjo player, guitarist, and mandolinist—and formed his first bluegrass band. After graduating from Washington University, he began cutting albums in Nashville; his second release, *Earthwords & Music*, included the folk-country hit "Gentle on My Mind," which won four Grammy Awards in 1968 after it was popularized by Glen Campbell. Hartford would go on to record with The Byrds and become a regular on the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, and *The Johnny Cash Show*, as well as earn his riverboat pilot's license. And he didn't rest on his laurels—as folk waned, he pioneered a "newgrass" sound that would influence musicians from Béla Fleck to Nickel Creek, then won a third Grammy in 1977 for his innovative, Mississippi-inspired *Mark Twang*. Hartford passed away in 2001—just a few months after winning a fourth Grammy for his contribution to the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack.

### POKEY LAFARGE AND THE SOUTH CITY THREE

As the success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack showed, the old is

## THE OZARK HILLBILLIES

Long before Gretchen Wilson and the members of Sugarland (whose keyboardist, Brandon Bush, came out of the same '90s Wash. U. music scene as Nadine) hit radio waves, musicians like guitarist "Lullaby" Lester Mayberry, yodeler/guitarist Roy Queen, and fiddler/banjo player Wade Ray were known for playing Western swing with Pappy Cheshire's National Champion Hillbillies. The group's members performed mornings (and late Saturday nights) on KMOX-AM from the late '20s through the '40s, in addition to serving as cast members on the radio show *Uncle Dick Slack's Barn Dance*. At that time, the station's wattage beamed its shows nearly coast-to-coast, especially at night, giving music lovers across the U.S. the chance to fall in love with St. Louis' country sounds.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL NORDMANN; ICON ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA EBERLEY

new again—and Pokey LaFarge and the South City Three are right in the midst of the revival. Shortly after LaFarge self-released his debut, *Marmalade*, in 2007, he snagged a main-stage spot at Portland, Ore.'s indie roots fest Pickathon; before long, the troubadour with old-time style was working with the similarly minded South City Three, comprising upright-bassist Joey Glynn, guitarist Adam Hoskins, and percussionist Ryan Koenig. Soon, the four were playing the U.K.'s Big Chill Festival, Denmark's Tønder Festival, and the Newport Folk Festival, where *Spin* dubbed the group the fest's Best Discovery in 2010. In the world of roots music and Americana, the four are rapidly rising stars, earning praise from *No Depression*, NPR Music, and many other outlets; charting in the U.S. and the U.K.; recording with rocker Jack White; and even ringing in 2012 alongside Aloe Blacc and Cyndi Lauper on BBC Two's *Hootenanny* with the legendary Jools Holland.

## CASSIE MORGAN AND THE LONELY PINE

Counting "life, good stories, old toy pianos, dirt, dust, and work" among its influences, this group is a relative newcomer to the twang scene, but the folky duo of Cassie Morgan and Beth Bombara has already received critical acclaim. Its 2010 release, *Weathered Hands, Weary Eyes*, featured the sounds of the band Berry and Americana singer-songwriter Liza Day. Bombara had previously played with Samantha Crain and the Midnight Shivers and released the solo EP *Abandon Ship* in 2007; Morgan released an EP, *Pine So Sweet*, in 2008, and won two solo RFT Music Awards before the duo won the Best Folk category last year. The two twentysomethings have a changeable sound that's difficult to characterize; their melancholy, bluesy folk has been compared to an early Cat Power, but their chanted harmonies, eclectic percussion, and retro style are sometimes more reminiscent of Twangfest fave Neko Case's solo work or a stripped-down version of the indie-rock New Pornographers. Either way, the comparisons the women are drawing are big—and favorable—and they appear to be poised for a breakout.



### 1. SON VOLT

Says Wendland, "I'm probably in the minority, but the best of Son Volt means more to me than the best of Uncle Tupelo."

### 2. THE GEYER STREET SHEIKS

The '90s mainstay's rich "trad-country" sounds, alternately bluesy and folky, featured deeply woven instrumentation and vocals.

### 3. THE SKELETONS

Call it a regional band; though it's based in Springfield, Mo., the touring roots rockers have frequented St. Louis since the '80s, backing acts like Syd Straw and Dave Alvin.

### 4. THE BOTTLE ROCKETS

The group's brand of wry-humored, country-style tales over amped-up rock guitar quickly earned it critical acclaim.

### 5. THE NEW PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY, BOB REUTER AND KAMIKAZE COWBOY, AND NADINE

"I couldn't, in good conscience, leave off any of the last three," says Wendland. Nadine was the breakout success (members would go on to play with The Incurables, Rough Shop, and Magnolia Summer), but all three exemplified '90s Midwestern twang—while bringing up a coterie of adherents who'd form the backbone of the scene in the new century.

