

EASTON, MD.

Turning up the volume

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When a friend suggested that I check out the music scene in Easton, Md., I had reservations. And not of the lodging variety.

I'd passed Easton dozens of times on the way to other Eastern Shore towns and associated it only with high-end boutiques, out-of-my-league art galleries, white tablecloth dining and the annual Waterfowl Festival. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It just wasn't enough to lure me off Route 50 for a visit.

But Sam Bush was. He was scheduled to perform at the Avalon Theatre, and the chance to see the king of "newgrass" was too hard to pass up. I bought tickets for Bush one night and Gary Louris (of the Jayhawks) the following night at the NightCat. If taking a risk with Easton meant suffering through two great concerts, this was a hardship I was willing to endure.

Plus, word on the street was that there was some hipness inching its way into town. In the past 10 months, a barbecue restaurant and a hippie shop have opened, and a young couple took over the Inn at Easton, reopening it as the Bartlett Pear Inn. And then there's the music.

For me, one of the joys of driving east is being able to tune in to WRNR. The station is a good stand-in for Washington's extinct alternative station, WHFS, except that you can't get Annapolis's WRNR in the District. On a recent Friday, I drove over the Bay Bridge, volume up, windows down. I made a pit stop at Matapeake State Park on Kent Island, a beautiful public beach that opened last year and has a panoramic view of the bridge. (Remember: Easton's inland, so stop here if you can't stand visiting the Eastern Shore without sticking your toes in the sand.)

In Easton, I grabbed dinner at the BBQ Joint with my friend Savannah, a bluegrass musician whose husband sold me my mandolin two years ago. We walked a couple of blocks to the Avalon, an old art-deco movie house. The theater has recently hosted the Temptations, Joan Rivers and Shawn Colvin. Its Stoltz Listening Room, a swank lounge and bar, opened last summer for smaller acts. For Sam Bush, the 400-seat theater was half-full, but it was a vocal crowd. "Nice tie-dye!" someone yelled to Bush from the balcony. I wasn't interested in his T-shirt. I was watching him do things on the mandolin that I never thought possible.

The next morning, after a trip to the Amish Country Farmers Market, I walked around downtown. I popped into Albright's Gun Shop, where you can drop \$5,800 on a Caesar Guerini,



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Cool, new destinations and a burgeoning music scene are livening up Easton, a once-sleepy town on the Eastern Shore. Above, the patio at the Bartlett Pear Inn (formerly the Inn at Easton). Adjoining the CoffeeCat, below, is the NightCat, an affordable and intimate music venue.

an Italian shotgun. "You're in good company," the shopkeeper told me. "Ladies are the fastest-growing group of gun buyers in the country." From there I checked out the town's two indie bookstores, Harrison Street Books and News Center, and a couple of seemingly out-of-place bodegas a few blocks off the main strip, including one that has a wall of Latin CDs across the aisle from jars of tender cactus and six-pound cans of jalapeño peppers.

I learned that Gary Louris had canceled his concert for that night, so I caught the NightCat's afternoon show: folk singer and songwriter Dan Navarro, of Lowen and Navarro fame. Although it was a glorious day, the 60-seat listening room was full. The NightCat, which adjoins CoffeeCat, has papaya-colored walls and tiny purple lights strung across the ceiling. The seats aren't fancy, and it isn't as polished as the Stoltz, but sight-lines are good, the price is right, and the setting is so intimate that Navarro recognized some of his fans from shows earlier in the week. The audience was mixed: There was a guy with a Santa Claus beard and an "Accordion Hero" T-shirt, and a couple of kids young enough to compel Navarro to keep his jokes clean.



GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

Getting there

Easton is about 70 miles east of Washington. Take U.S. Route 50 east across the Bay Bridge; about 30 miles later, turn right on Dover Street and left on Harrison Street to downtown.

IF YOU GO

STAYING THERE

Bartlett Pear Inn

28 S. Harrison St.
410-770-3300
www.bartlettpearinn.com

Seven guest rooms, starting at \$125 including breakfast. Pet-friendly.

Hampton Inn

8058 Ocean Gateway
410-822-2200
www.hamptoninn-easton.com

The newest of Easton's chain lodging options on Route 50. Weekend rates start at \$145.

EATING THERE

The BBQ Joint

216 E. Dover St.
410-690-3641
www.andrewvansbbqjoint.com

Wood chips on the floor and a T-Rex sampler for \$56 that should feed the entire family.

Out of the Fire

22 Goldsborough St.
410-770-4777
www.outofthefire.com

Lunch and dinner, organic and locally sourced. Dinner entrees from \$18.

ROCKING OUT THERE

Avalon Theatre

40 E. Dover St.
410-822-7299
www.avalontheatre.com

Tickets \$15-\$45. Stoltz Listening Room hosts smaller shows, including comedy every third Thursday all summer.

NightCat

5 Goldsborough St.
410-690-4544
www.nightcatmusic.com
Tickets \$12-\$25.

First Annual Monty Alexander Jazz Festival

www.chesapeakechambermusic.org/jazz
The festival, Sept. 3-4, will include a performance by the Grace Kelly Quintet and the Monty Alexander Trio.

INFORMATION

www.eastonmainstreet.com



The artists like Easton because they can let their guard down here, said Mark Mangold, who books shows for the NightCat in his spare time. (His day job is doing the same for Rams Head Live in Baltimore.) "They know they won't come here and be on TMZ or YouTube later."

I was having drinks and sushi at General Tanuki's with Mangold and his business partner, both in their early 30s, who book 170 shows a year at the NightCat. Mangold grew up in Easton and told me it used to be a sleepy town. Now, it's exciting enough that about 70 percent of the NightCat's patrons are out-of-towners.

Sunday morning I lounged with breakfast and my beagle on the patio of the Bartlett Pear. Surrounded by flowering perennials, with a trickling, rubber-duckie-filled fountain, this spot is arguably the most peaceful in town.

On my way out of Easton, I stopped by Tammy's Cool Things, the new hippie shop, which sells loose teas, art, jewelry and clothing. There's a 1,000-piece Woodstock jigsaw puzzle and an entire room of tie-dye. I asked Tammy whether she'd looked for a storefront downtown instead of her location on Route 50. She told me, in so many words, that her merchandise doesn't fit into genteel downtown. But local kids, she said, are now regular customers.

Peace out. I hopped back into my car with the beagle, tuned in to RNR and drove toward the bridge.

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Kaplan, a freelance writer in Washington, aspires to play her mandolin one-fifth as fast as Sam Bush.