

Artists & Promoters Weigh In on the Asbury Park Musical Renaissance

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Michael Black/Getty Images
Asbury Park, NJ.

For the second year in a row, Asbury Park will host major rock acts when Dave Matthews Band and The Lumineers headline this fall's Sea.Hear.Now Festival (Sept. 21-22). An event of this scale likely wouldn't have happened 30 years ago, when Asbury Park was regarded to some degree as an Atlantic Ocean-adjacent wasteland: the boardwalk was tattered, storefronts were empty and entrepreneurial ventures were impermanent.

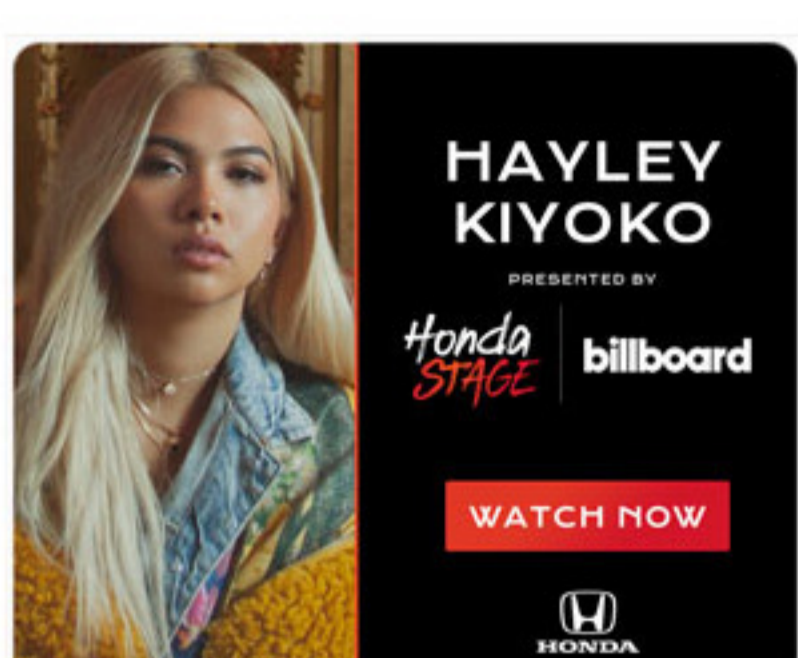
Asbury was a place where Danny Clinch, the esteemed Bruce Springsteen photographer and co-founder of Sea.Hear.Now, would take musicians who wanted "gritty" and "raw" shoots that weren't in New York City at the start of his career in the '80s and '90s. "I would be like, 'Hey, let's go to Asbury Park,'" he recalls. "And we would go down there and have the whole entire place to ourselves because there was basically nobody there."

But with a bustling scene in 2019, that description of the New Jersey town couldn't be further from reality these days. A lot has changed in the Central Jersey shore town: boardwalks are bustling, beaches are destination spots, upscale restaurants and boutiques are interspersed throughout Asbury's idyllic downtown area, and most prominently, it's become a hub for the Garden State's music scene.

Of course, the music scene in Asbury is hardly new. The Jersey town has long boasted renowned venues such as The Stone Pony, The Saint and Asbury Lanes (which has since closed and reopened), but booking-wise, options were limited to just a handful of venues for some time. "I grew up in North Jersey, and I never went to any shows, there was nowhere to go," says Brian Sella of New Jersey punk band The Front Bottoms. "A place like Asbury Park for New Jersey [is] right in the middle and it's like, oh, okay, this is where lesser-known bands are going to come when they play New York City."

In the past five years, Asbury has steadily asserted its dominance in the New Jersey music scene. The seaside town has become a booming artists' haven with the re-opening of its seminal bowling alley/venue Asbury Lanes, a new DIY venue House of Independents, alongside a host of newly minted summer festivals like Jack Antonoff's Shadow of the City Festival, Asbury Park Music & Film Festival and 2018's inaugural Sea.Hear.Now Festival. With these added venues and fests, the town -- once a one-off destination for touring bands -- has become a regular stop in-between New York and Philadelphia.

Even as the area grows, the ethos of the community hasn't been swallowed by developers. The DIY scene is being fostered by House of Independents as well as Lakehouse Music Academy, where young talent can launch their music careers, while iStar's revival of Asbury Lanes invigorates the community but promotes tourism alongside the development of the Asbury Waterfront. The growth of local businesses in the Asbury community in general has helped, too. For The Gaslight Anthem's Brian Fallon, those things go hand in hand: "It's a little hard if you have a venue and nothing else around it, and if you have shops and nothing else to support that. Now there are a bunch of businesses where each one shakes hands with the others."



While Asbury's vibrant music scene existed before Bruce Springsteen -- it was a hotspot for jazz, gospel and doo-wop earlier at [various points in the 20th century](#) -- it was the Long Branch, NJ-born rocker who put a spotlight on the central Jersey beach town. Starting with his iconic 1973 debut *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* Springsteen used Asbury as a backdrop for his songwriting, and entered it into the cultural consciousness. Since then, the Jersey shore town has become a nationally renowned part of the Garden State, even to people who have never visited.

Just one year following the release of Springsteen's debut LP, gritty rock venue The Stone Pony opened, which would help further his career, as well as the careers of fellow Jersey natives Jon Bon Jovi and E-Street band member Patti Scialfa. While Asbury remained a town struggling with failed entrepreneurial efforts for nearly three decades, Springsteen spent the early 2000s advocating for a resurgence, performing benefits and local gigs in town. Springsteen has, in many ways, been a catalyst for the community's musical renaissance. "The history of Asbury Park musically, you've got your Bruce Springsteen there for sure, and Southside Johnny and Bon Jovi, but what people don't realize is that every great band from the 1960s and the 1970s played at the Convention Hall except for The Beatles," says Clinch.

Like The Boss, Bleachers' Jack Antonoff -- also a New Jersey native -- has made it a personal goal to raise the profile of the beachside community. In 2015, Antonoff launched the Shadow of the City Festival, with the purpose of honoring his home state, recruiting artists like Carly Rae Jepsen, The 1975 and Hayley Kiyoko throughout his tenure to take the Stone Pony stage for an annual one-day festival. Just a few months after Antonoff's festival began, DIY venue House of Independents would open its doors on Cookman Ave. The venue, which has hosted shows from Sorority Noise and Tonight Alive, has remained focused on independent artists from the rock, punk and hardcore scenes, alongside CBGB-inspired space The Saint, which opened in 1994.

Under a rare set of circumstances, capitalism and the DIY community are seemingly working in tandem to boost the music scene. Asbury Partners created a boardwalk design in the 2002 Waterfront Redevelopment Plan, which was eventually [acquired by iStar Financial in 2009](#). Since then, iStar has had a hand in re-creating buzz around Asbury and its music scene, spearheading the re-opening of Asbury Lanes, along with the making of The Asbury Hotel. While it's certainly less punk to be owned by an investment company, the Lanes were restored and reopened in 2018 as a hybrid bowling alley/venue once again. Despite the some new accoutrements, the venue is preserved with pieces from its past: vintage stereos, stacked bowling balls and a 1950s style diner. iStar even offered a space to Clinch as a pop-up exhibit for his work, which was supposed to be for three months, but has lasted for over two-and-a-half years, showcasing the musical history of Asbury. "It's become quite a little community center," says Clinch of the space.

The spotlight on Asbury can also be attributed to the presence of The Bowery Presents under AEG, who [inked a deal with Asbury Lanes](#) for booking in 2018, as well as the continuation of the town's decade-long booking deal with Live Nation for the Stone Pony and Asbury's waterfront venues: the Stone Pony Summer Stage, the Wonder Bar, the Paramount Theatre and Convention Hall.

From Fallon's vantage point, the surge of music, synergy of venues and presence of conglomerates hasn't been a hindrance. It's created different silos for artists depending on whether they're amateurs or novices. "The people that can play at Asbury Lanes are not the same people that can play the Paramount or the Summer Stage at the Stone Pony -- there's levels here," says Fallon. "If you have one band at the Lanes and one band at House of Independents I think that can work -- I don't necessarily see that as it has to be one or the other."

"In the past, I think bands would pass through and hit Philly and New York and not do a Jersey date, so it's exciting in that sense, but the competition is harder with AEG and Live Nation in town," says Mike Lawrence, talent buyer at House of Independents. He does credit The Bowery Presents and Live Nation with garnering interest among agents and managers when it comes to having Asbury as a destination for their bands. Despite the corporate competition, Lawrence maintains that the venue is, in fact, doing well.

While rock is synonymous with the Asbury scene, hip-hop is finally making headway in the area. "I think it's important to recognize is that Asbury was founded and created as a resort town for white people," says Rodney Coursey, concert promoter and founder of Garden State Hip-Hop. "When that's the foundation of the city, and when it becomes gentrified and redeveloped, you kind of want to keep that old-school foundation present, which means you want to limit your association with urban culture regardless of the [fact that] majority of the city's population is African-American on the westside of town."

Up until recently there was still a segregation within the East and West side of the town. "Hip-hop is everywhere -- it's the most popular genre in the world right now, and I also think that's a huge disconnect with some of the venue owners," adds Coursey. There are small changes, however. Select hip-hop shows have been emerging at House of Independents and regular shows have been happening at The Saint, [according to the Asbury Park Press](#). This past summer, Clinch's Transparent Gallery, The Langosta Lounge and Asbury Lanes hosted hip-hop performances. Asbury's Wonder Bar even hosted The Asbury Park Hip-Hop Fest in August.

While it's progress, there still plenty of room for growth. "What's happening now is people like myself are booking shows through Garden State Hip-Hop and other promoters -- like Chris Rockwell and my friends who own Black Suburbia Music -- are booking hip-hop events that you're not having any problems [with]," says Coursey. "Some of them are selling out, the performances are awesome and everybody's professional. We're changing the ideology, but it's important to recognize that [Asbury] isn't an urban city." Last year, Asbury Lanes had Lupe Fiasco and Talib Kweli perform, and The Stone Pony had a headlining gig for Wyclef Jean, but there's a lack of consistency. Together, Coursey and local promoters are trying to remedy this.

Ultimately, Asbury's artistic prosperity can be attributed to its entire community. Musicians who originally moved for there for cheap rent in a cool spot created their own scene, says Clinch. "Some [musicians] had moved to Los Angeles and they just moved back because they're like, 'Nobody is supporting each other. They're all in competition,'" he says. Fallon is still amazed by the musicians he sees spending time together in Asbury. He recalls being at coffee shop Cafe Volan and seeing Brian Baker from Minor Threat and Bad Religion hanging out with Dennis [Lyxzén] from The Refused and International Noise Conspiracy and telling his five-year-old-sons, "These are punk rock legends. This is who daddy looked up to growing up -- you're in the presence of royalty right now." It was an encouraging moment for him, but he thought about the young artists from Asbury who could have experienced a similarly special interaction. "There's probably some kid sitting there being like there's Brian Baker from Minor Threat, Dennis from Refuse and Brian Fallon from Gaslight Anthem," he explains. "Just that interaction, which is pretty insignificant in the context of the world, could have inspired [someone]. Art breeds art and creativity breeds creativity. That's what's happening."

That connectivity continues to make Asbury a hotbed of music. "The town moniker is 'Asbury Park, where music lives,' so there's a welcome and a current environment that is fostering and breathing music," says Kyle Brendle, house promoter at The Stone Pony. And now, thanks to a tight-knit community of people who want to create a legacy, the renaissance flourishing in the beachside town is finally getting its due.



Mike Derer/AP/REX/Shutterstock

The Stone Pony in Asbury Park, NJ.