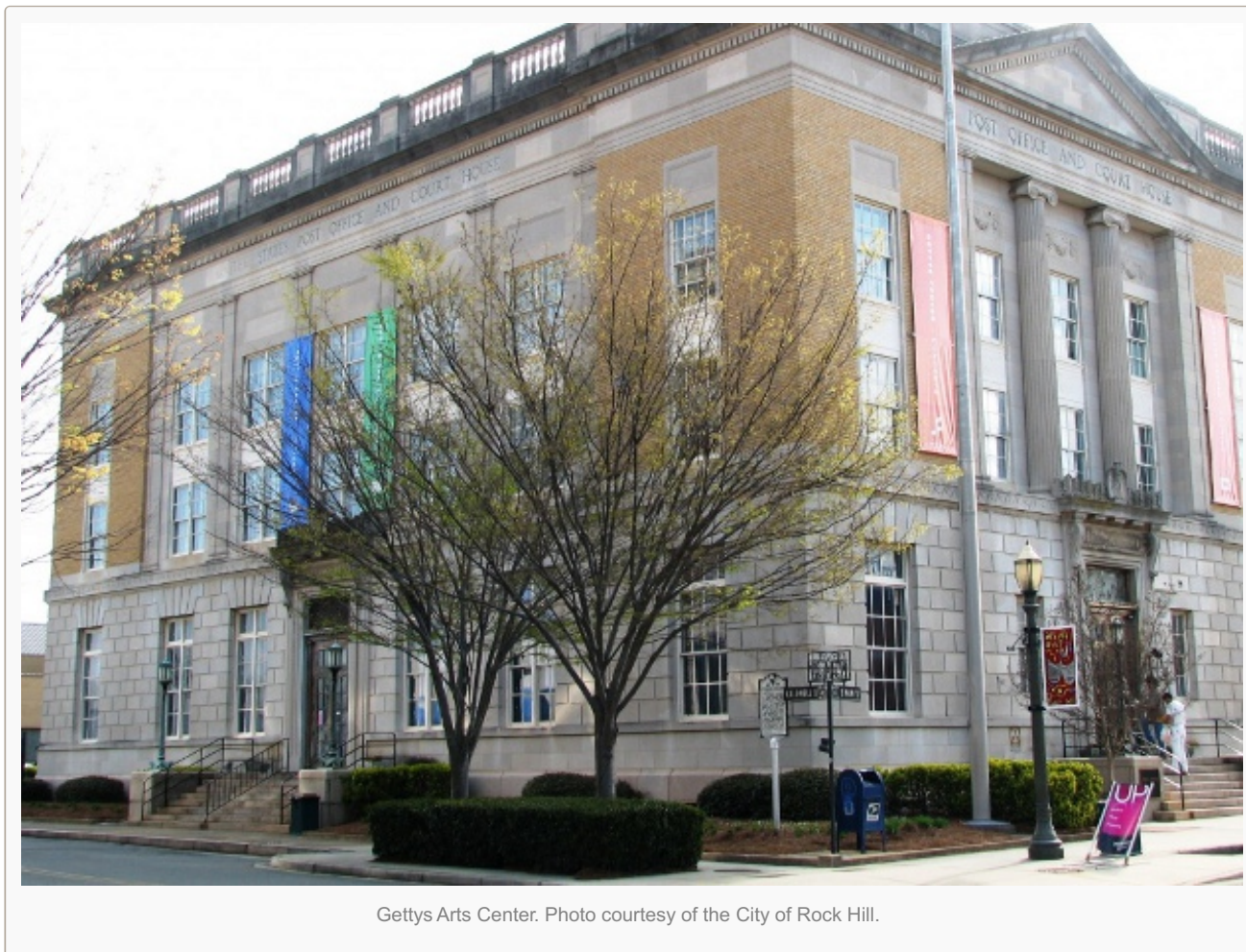


Rock Hill: No Need to Leave

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By Jordan Lawrence



As arts scenes go, Rock Hill is in a weird position. With just more than 66,000 people — according to the 2010 census — it's the fifth largest city in South Carolina. But it's spaced between two larger cities in Charlotte (30 minutes to the north) and Columbia (one hour to the south), meaning the burg's population has ample options for seeking entertainment elsewhere. It's a college town, the home of Winthrop University, but the small public university only enrolls about 6,000 students, hardly the influx brought in by larger state schools.

For a music and arts scene to thrive in such a place truly takes a community effort, focusing their efforts towards home and not eyeing the bigger towns nearby. Elonzo, now one of the most polished and passionate pop and country-rock bands in the Carolinas, sprang to life in Rock Hill five years ago. Singer Jeremy Davis now lives in Charlotte, but he is quick to sing his old home's praises, emphasizing that the local scene helped Elonzo grow into the band it is now.

"There's a community that's really interested in being able to do things in Rock Hill and not having to leave to go to Charlotte," he says. "That's basically sprouted up since I moved there and gotten better since I left."

Elonzo's first gig was on Main Street at the Irish pub **McHale's**. With frequent live music that includes appearances from up-and-coming local groups, the pub continues to be a place for new bands to get their start. With a solid beer selection and a comfortable atmosphere, Davis says it's also a nice spot to grab a quick drink before heading off to other activities.

"The cool thing about that place is they do want the community of musicians who are doing original music to be playing there as well as whatever else they would normally have," he says.

Davis says his favorite venue in town is **The Courtroom** inside the **Gettys Arts Center**. Mike Gentry — who also books bands at **The Sweat Lodge**, the town's house-show headquarters (find Mike on Facebook to get the address) — books music in the renovated municipal space, which is complete with bench and witness stand. Making good use of the unconventional room, he has hosted exciting regional acts — Greensboro punk powerhouse Torch Runner, epic and energetic Columbia pop band The Sea Wolf Mutiny, Charlotte's exuberant Yardwork — and a host of touring bands; Davis fondly remembers seeing Brooklyn's rising Laura Stevenson and her polished folk-pop ensemble, The Cans. The music at The Courtroom is part of the **Friday Arts Project**, which programs diverse arts events on Fridays and other days of the week as well.

"It's literally just this huge room," Davis says. "The ceiling's probably like 30-foot, so it's a cavernous space. Everything's marble; the floor is marble. It just has a lot of history, and it's really cool."

Other music venues in town include the hard rock-centric **Money** and the somewhat more diverse **Firewater 110**, both of which Davis says he hasn't visited very often.

None of the local bands that frequent these clubs would be able to do so without gear. In Rock Hill, that means heading to **Woody's**, which sells and repairs instruments and equipment in addition to its selection of used records and albums from local bands. Davis says the shop's service is unbeatable, fondly recalling how they would rent — or sometimes simply loan — him a PA for gigs at venues without a proper sound system.

"I would actually just ride my bike up there all the time and see what was going on," Davis says. "Most of the record selection was used, but we had our stuff in there and other people putting out albums around town were able to put them in there."

As far as activities outside of the arts, Davis endorses expeditions to some of the town's outdoor areas. Located on the university's campus, **Winthrop Lake** is perfect for a quick round of disc golf; its course was used in the 1997 World Championships. For a less active afternoon, Davis recommends relaxing amid the beautiful flowers and fountains at **Glencairn Gardens**. He also advises that **Confederate Park** is a prime place for a nap.

After all this recreation, Davis suggests a few options for enticing Rock Hill-eats: He says the extensive menu at the family-owned Greek-style diner **Old Town Bistro** is filled with fare that can best any hangover. He's a fan of the sandwich experts at the **White Horse**, too, which also boasts tasty salads and entrees, and he notes that McHale's has great burgers to go along with its beer and music.

"What Rock Hill has to offer, much like Charlotte, is a strong community just under the surface," Davis says. "[It's] quickly adding some great eating establishments and groups that are interested in bringing life to the community instead of finding it elsewhere."