**FAMED FESTIVALS**

**Among the most notable festivals on the Blue Ridge Music Trails, these events offer many story possibilities. Each has its unique history, musicians who have their stories to tell, and the venues and locations that host the fun offer a backdrop of mountain heritage.**

**MerleFest**

MerleFest is the state’s most famous festival, attracting more than 75,000 regional, national and international fans and considered one of the premier music festivals in the country. The four-day event features more than 90 artists spread across 14 stages on the campus of Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, and focuses on many types of traditional and folk music. [www.merlefest.org](http://www.merlefest.org).

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While you’re in town, take time to visit the Wilkes Heritage Museum and Blue Ridge Music Hall of Fame, 100 E. Main St., Wilkesboro, [www.wilkesheritagemuseum.com](http://www.wilkesheritagemuseum.com).

**Mount Airy Bluegrass and Old-Time Fiddler’s Convention**

This two-night outdoors event the first weekend in June at Mount Airy Veterans Memorial Park started in 1972 to honor the famed Surry County Round Peak musical style of banjo and fiddle playing. It now attracts hundreds of musicians and thousands of mountain music fans. [www.mountairyfiddlersconvention.com](http://www.mountairyfiddlersconvention.com).

While you’re in town, check out the Old-Time Music Heritage Hall at the Earle Theatre, also home to the weekly live mountain-music radio show “Merry-Go-Round” and the annual Tommy Jarrell Festival. 142 North Main St., www.theearle.org.

**Mountain Dance and Folk Festival**

Downtown Asheville is the scene of this three-day event, the oldest continuing festival of traditional mountain music and dance in the country, held at the Diana Wortham Theatre, Pack Square, www.folkheritage.org.

The Shindig on the Green free concert series takes place most other weekends throughout the summer at Pack Square Park.

**Red, White and Bluegrass Festival**

Every year from June 30 to July 4 thousands of bluegrass fans converge on the Catawba Meadows Park in Morganton for one of the state’s large music events. What grew out of the city’s Fourth of July celebration now boasts a lineup of more than 30 of the biggest names in bluegrass. www.redwhiteandbluegrassfestival.com.

**MORE INTIMATE SETTINGS**

**Many places along the Blue Ridge Music Trails offer amazing opportunities to hear music up close and personal, meet the musicians, and even join in the dancing that often happens spontaneously as audiences move to the spirit of the music.**

**Zuma Coffee**

Downtown Marshall, bordered on the south by the French Broad River and the north by the sheer stone face of a mountain, hosts weekly bluegrass jams at Zuma Coffee. Fiddling legend and local resident Bobby Hicks often emcees the lively Thursday evening event, which is pictured on the cover of *Blue Ridge Music Trails*. 7 North Main St., www.zumacoffee.blogspot.com.

While you’re in town, check out the mountain music and dance event every Friday evening at the nearby Depot.

**Jam Sessions at the T. M. Rickman General Store**

Every Friday afternoon from May to October, the Friends of Rickman’s Store holds an open bluegrass an old-time jam session on the upstairs porch overlooking the Little Tennessee Valley. Inside, community volunteers are on hand with displays of vintage store equipment, furnishings, and local crafts. The store, part of the 370 acre Cowee-West's Mill National Historic District and acquired by the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee in August of 2007, reopened that same year and hosts community events year-round. 251 Cowee Creek Road (off of Highway 28 about 6 miles North of Franklin), [www.rickmanstore.com](http://www.rickmanstore.com).

**Drexel Barber Shop**

One of the more quaint musical venues on the Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina is the tiny barber shop in the tiny town of Drexel, just east of Morganton. The regulars gather at noon on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Depending on the day, you might hear gospel, country and western, or bluegrass. The shop was the subject of an Emmy-nominated documentary film *Pickin’ and Trimmin*. 100 South Main St., Drexel. Find on Facebook.

**Alleghany Jubilee**

Every Saturday evening 100 or more dancers from around northwestern North Carolina converge upon the historic Spartan Theater to dance the mountain two-step to the music of some of the region’s most popular traditional groups. On Tuesdays, there’s another bluegrass and old-time picking session with dancing. 25 North Main St., Sparta. www.alleghanyjubilee.com.

**TASTY STOPS ALONG THE TRAIL**

**Music, food, and lots of fun await visitors to these venues.**

**Sims Country Bar-B-Que**

Travel along a half-mile dirt drive and keep the faith—at the end, you’ll find this spot that is part restaurant, park, music stage and dance center. Sims serves real barbecue, pit cooked over wood, along with plenty of fixin’s. Old-time and bluegrass music is played every Friday and Saturday evenings. On the second Saturday in October, Sims hosts its annual Molasses Festival. 6160 Petra Mill Road, Granite Falls, http://www.simscountrybarbque.com/

**The Orchard at Altapass**

Set in a stunning location along the Blue Ridge Parkway, this historic apple orchard has a cafe and nearly every imaginable concoction that can be made with apples, including preserves, jelly, jam, barbecue sauce, relish and cider. You-pick apple season runs mid-July through late October. Live bands play at the Orchard Wednesday through Sunday afternoons from May through September, and weekend afternoons in October, along with special old-time performances. 1025 Orchard Road, Milepost 328.3 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. www.altapassorchard.com

**Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center**

Located in a picturesque valley 10 miles northeast of Robbinsville, the center was founded to preserve the old Stecoah Union School building and revitalize the community. The auditorium hosts a wide variety of music and dance performances, and special events occur throughout the year, as well as a seasonal weekly tailgate market. “An Appalachian Evening” is a summer concert series from late June to early September, featuring many of the regions most popular artists. An on-site commercial kitchen provides meals for the center‘s cafe and for the special Dinner with the Band series, where visitors can enjoy a private dinner with a featured band after the sound check. 121 Schoolhouse Road, Robbinsville. [www.stecoahvalleycenter.com](http://www.stecoahvalleycenter.com)

**FOR A SONG**

**Traditional singing takes on different forms in the mountains. Discover amazing voices and meet the singers and story-tellers at these special events.**

**Ballad and Story Swap at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival**

Madison County boasts one of the oldest and purest ballad traditions. A unique feature at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival is the ballad and story swaps, intimate performances where audience members get a chance to get to know the singers and hear the stories behind the songs. The festival, on the first Saturday in October in Mars Hill, features song, dance, food and craft. 100 Athletic St., www.lunsfordfestival.com

**Annual Shape-Note Singing at the John C. Campbell Folk School**

Shape-note singing is an a capella style of Protestant religious singing. Instead of reading music by the placement of the notes on the staff, shape-note singers sound out the tune by reading the shapes of the notes. Originally published in 1866, William Walker's Christian Harmony is the oldest “seven-shape” collection to have remained in continuous use. The annual daylong summertime shape-note event at John C. Campbell Folk School draws more than 70 singers from four states. One Folk School Road, Brasstown. www.folkschool.org.

**Snowbird Mountain Singing**

Cherokee hymn singing is a uniquely Cherokee tradition that evolved with the shape-note harmony singing tradition. Local churches and choirs around the Snowbird Cherokee community continue the practice of singing shape-note hymns in the Cherokee language. Singings take place at different locations around Snowbird, including the Fading Voices Memorial Day festival. The largest occurs the second weekend in July at the Little Snowbird Baptist Church. 1897 Little Snowbird Road, Robbinsville. www.grahamcountytravel.com.

**Etowah Christian Harmony Singing**

The shape-note event in Etowah, near Hendersonville, takes place twice a year and is one of the longest-running and largest in the state. It began in 1907 at a private home and now shifts between the Etowah United Methodist Church and Cummings Memorial Methodist Church in nearby Horseshoe. Schedule at www.christianharmony.org.

**Christian Harmony Singing at Saint John’s Church**

The Saturday before the second Sunday in December, Saint John’s Church in downtown Rutherfordton hosts a daylong Christian Harmony singing. Saint John’s, built in 1849, is known for its wonderful acoustics and is one of the best examples of Greek Revival architecture in western N.C. 702 North Main St., Rutherfordton.

**DELIGHTFUL DOWNTOWNS**

**As you journey in search of mountain music stories, you will make stops in many charming mountain towns and communities. Here are but a few—taking the backroads and byways will reward you with the discovery of many more.**

**Mount Airy**

Mount Airy, population 10,400, was settled in the 1750s as a stagecoach stop and incorporated in 1885. These days it’s known as **Mayberry USA** because this is Andy Griffith’s hometown and served as inspiration for his iconic television series. Fans of *The Andy Griffith Show* can visit the Andy Griffith Museum, Floyd's City Barber Shop, Opie's Candy Store, Wally's Service Station, Mayberry Soda Fountain, the Old City Jail, and stop for a bite at the Snappy Lunch, all in walking distance along Main Street. Or, if you‘d rather ride, go for a cruise on a Squad Car Tour. Traditional music stars here as well, as Mayberry hosts the famed Mount Airy Bluegrass and Old-Time Fiddler’s Convention in June and is home to the Old-Time Music Heritage Hall at the Earle Theatre, where you’ll find the weekly live mountain-music radio show “Merry-Go-Round” and the annual Tommy Jarrell Festival. http://www.visitmayberry.com/

**Todd**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Todd, a timber transporting boom town, was larger than Boone. Today, the picturesque village (an unincorporated community) is spread out along one last short stretch of its nearly forgotten railroad, washed out long ago by flooding. In the past decade, Todd has evolved into a visitor destination thanks to its active community and the restoration of two historic structures, the Todd General Store (1914) and the tin-sided Todd Mercantile (1910), both home to traditional music events. The store hosts a bluegrass jam on Friday nights (www.toddgeneralstore.com) and the mercantile (now a cafe and bakery) hosts square or contra dances (toddmercantile.com). Summer brings the Todd Concert Series (www.toddnc.org), and the second Saturday in October draws hundreds of fans for the Todd New River Festival ([www.toddruritan.com](http://www.toddruritan.com)). www.toddnc.org, www.ashechamber.com

**Burnsville**

The centerpiece of Burnsville, established in 1834 and with a population of 1,700, is the town’s historic square, a grassy and shady park within walking distance of restaurants and shops and ringed by historic buildings. The annual Music in the Mountains Folk Festival (www.toeriverarts.org) takes place inside the Town Center the last Saturday in September. Town Center also hosts Riddlefest (www.tvgnc.org) the third Saturday in February, which honors the memory of Lesley “Esley” Riddle, a young African American blues musician credited with gathering mountain tunes for the famed Carter Family of Virginia and with teaching Maybelle Carter her trademark guitar techniques. www.yanceychamber.com/

**Hot Springs**

Hot Springs can lay claim to being the only place in western North Carolina where you can bathe in hot mineral water from underground thermal springs (at Hot Springs Spa and Resort,) and one of the few towns in the country the Appalachian Trail runs through. Its population of 560 grows significantly the second Saturday in June for the Bluff Mountain Music Festival, a daylong event that features traditional, old-time, and bluegrass musicians and dancers from in and around the county. http://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/

**Shelby**

Shelby, incorporated in 1843, was home to many of the state’s famed political leaders, known as the Shelby Ring, in the early to mid 1900s. Today, the city of 20,000 enjoys a revitalized historic downtown, or Uptown, as it’s known, with several buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. One of those is the Don Gibson Theatre (www.dgshelby.com), a 1939 movie house recently restored to its former glory and renamed to honor native son Gibson, a famed country music star in the 1950s and 1960s. The new Earl Scruggs Center, housed in the 1907 courthouse, features many exhibits about the famed banjo player and other traditional musicians and their craft. On the third weekend in October, Shelby hosts the Livermush Expo, a wry festival focused on a food product, and the Art of Sound Music Festival, featuring a diverse range of musical groups from the region. www.destinationclevelandcounty.org.

**Waynesville**

Waynesville, founded in 1809 and with a population nearing 10,000, is the largest town in Western North Carolina west of Asheville. Downtown is alive with shops, art galleries, cafés and restaurants, all within walking distance on Main Street's brick sidewalks. On alternate Friday evenings beginning the first Friday after July Fourth and continuing though August, you’ll find a sight not to be missed -- an old-fashioned mountain hoedown in the heart of downtown. The famed Mountain Street Dance, led by Joe Sam Queen (grandson of its founder), invites hundreds of people, from toddlers to octogenarians, to join a giant square dance to live music. ww.downtownwaynesville.com, www.visitncsmokies.com

**MUSIC IN MUSEUMS**

**Small local museums often preserve the stories of the people who made the music of the region. There are nearly 100 such museums on the Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina. A visit can give writers in-depth background on musicians, luthiers, and storytellers whose work is celebrated today.**

**Swannanoa Valley Museum, Black Mountain**

An exhibition, *Music Traditions in the Swannanoa Valley*, explores the musical history of this valley east of Asheville with vintage instruments, audio-visuals and stories about noted Swannanoa Valley musicians, including fiddler Marcus Martin. 223 W. State Street, Black Mountain, www.swannanoavalleymuseum.org

**Mount Airy Museum of Regional History**

*The Luthier’s Craft: Instrument Making Traditions in the Blue Ridge* exhibit, funded in part by the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, includes images of luthiers at work as well as instruments built by working luthiers. Related programming includes a cigar-box guitar workshop and musical programs featuring the luthiers in the exhibit. 301 N. Main St., www.northcarolinamuseum.org.

**YOU’RE NEVER TOO YOUNG TO LEARN**

**Youth in the mountain regions are participating in a new wave of interest in traditional music.**

Interest among young people is growing thanks to after-school resources, traditional music camps, and online sharing services, including unprecedented web-based access to archival materials that document musicians from Western North Carolina. Regional and the state arts councils’ after-school programs are leading the way. Western N.C. currently supports 14 of these programs, more than in any other state. The largest is the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM), founded in 2000 by Helen White. JAM students meet in small-group settings, with emphasis on playing by ear. They also learn about the history of the music, take field trips to music venues, and spend time with musical elders. JAM ensembles and bands perform around the region. The idea has proven so popular that similar programs have spread across the mountain regions of bordering states. The Arts Council also offers the Tradition Arts Program (TAPS) in other regions of the state. [www.regionaljam.org](http://www.regionaljam.org) or [www.NCArts.org](http://www.NCArts.org)

**YOU’RE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN, EITHER**

**Opportunities for adults to learn the cultural heritage of the region, including how to play the music.**

Surrounded by forests and mountains in the far west of the state, the 372-acre John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown provides experiences in non-competitive learning and community life that are joyful and enlivening. Adults of all ages can take year-round weeklong and weekend classes in craft, art, music, dance, cooking, gardening, nature studies, photography and writing, with special attention given to traditional mountain arts. The school also is home to the History Center, which traces the school from its beginning in 1925 and provides an overview of Appalachian culture. It also hosts a concert series, community dances, and special events. If you want a crash course in Appalachian culture, this is a great place to start. [www.folkschool.org](http://www.folkschool.org)