

## Grand Ole Opry

Nashville's radio station WSM ("We Shield Millions," the slogan of its insurance-company sponsor) first broadcast on October 5, 1925. Two years later, at the start of his Barn Dance show, compere George D. Hay announced "for the past hour we have been listening to music taken largely from Grand Opera, but from now on we will present The Grand Ole Opry ." This piece of slang became the name of America's longest-running radio show, still going out to millions every Friday and Saturday evening on WSM-AM (650); the original "hillbilly" jam session has become country music's elite showcase. Swiftly outgrowing the WSM studios, the show moved in 1943 to a former tabernacle - the Ryman Auditorium . There it acquired a make-or-break reputation; up-and-coming singers could only claim to have made it if they had gone down well at the Opry. Among thousands of hopefuls who tried to get on the show was Elvis Presley, advised by an Opry official in 1954 to stick to truck-driving. The first appearance of Hank Williams , in 1949, commanded an unequaled six encores. Within four years, the Opry audience was singing his evangelical I Saw the Light on the news of his drink- and drug-induced death. In 1974 the show moved on again, this time to a new purpose-built 4424-seat theater in what was the Opryland theme park (now the Opry Mills mall) - one of many Opry spin-offs, including hotels, TV stations and a record label. Among more than sixty stars currently on the Opry roster are old-timers like Hank Snow and Charlie Louvin, perennial superstars like Dolly Parton, and current country chart-toppers such as Garth Brooks and Alison Krauss. However, many of the younger artists are busy touring, so most shows are dominated by stars whose best days have past. Throughout the year, two performances on Saturday night at 6.30pm and 9.30pm and one on Friday night at 7.30pm feature up to twenty acts. During the summer there's an extra Friday night show and matinee on Tuesday. The line-ups are usually announced at the box office on the preceding Thursday. Tickets are \$23-25 and not too hard to get, especially if you book in advance. Contact the box office at 2808 Opryland Drive, Nashville, TN 37214 (tel 615/889-3060).