

MYRTLE BEACH ROCKS!

By Katie McElveen

For years, the best show in Myrtle Beach was the nightly cruise along Ocean Boulevard. That all changed in 1986 when Missouri native Calvin Gilmore opened Carolina Opry in a small venue in nearby Surfside Beach and premiered the region's original music variety show.

Visitors loved the high energy combination of bluegrass, pop, rock 'n' roll, gospel and a dash of comedy, and soon, entertainment theaters owned by celebrities such as Dolly Parton and country supergroup Alabama were popping up all over the Grand Strand. Catering to families, the shows feature elaborate costumes, talented performers and excellent, witty writing.

Today, Carolina Opry occupies a 2,200-seat theater with the shows offering a glittering mix of song and dance complete with Vegas-style lights, sound and costumes. It's a far cry from the 13-member troupe that first performed in 1986. On Friday night, Carolina Opry flashes back to the 60's, 70's and 80's with a multi-media rock-n-roll retrospective that takes the audience on a Magical Mystery Tour through the music of the Beatles, KISS, the Rolling Stones and everything in between.

Country is king at Alabama Theatre, but surrounded by a court that includes Broadway showstoppers, Motown favorites and flat-out fabulous dance, the king gets his groove on. One, the Show! is Alabama Theatre's latest, a thumping ensemble production featuring Regina McCrary, who has performed with Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan and even Elvis Presley. True to their musical roots, Alabama Theatre keeps the Grand Strand rockin' with live concerts from artists such as the Oak Ridge Boys, Kenny Rogers, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Grand Strand faves the Drifters and the Coasters.

At Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede Dinner & Show, a cast of 250 that includes more than two dozen horses and their riders, as well as buffalo and ostrich, re-enact the Civil War in a foot-stompin', rebel-yellin' production that includes stunt riders and magic. It's easy to make an entire evening out of Dixie Stampede: the paddock is opened a few hours before the show each evening so you can visit with the horses and enjoy a pre-dinner, non-alcoholic drink in a souvenir boot-shaped mug while you watch the opening act. Dinner is served during the main event, but don't despair if yours comes with no flatware: the entire meal is meant to be eaten with your hands.

Horses are also part of the action at Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament, where the magnificent Andalucians—a royal breed

from Spain—have been trained to kneel before royalty, leap into the air and rear with magnificent grace. During this elaborate show, 11th-century Knights in full regalia battle for their kingdom as loyal subjects cheer them on. The evening begins with a dinner served "Medieval Style"—or no silverware—on pewter dishes by costumed "serfs and wenches." Then the games begin – daring horseback maneuvers of skill, jousting and, finally, hand-to-hand combat using swords and axes.

Supersized with 2,600 seats and topped with a massive Tiffany-blue dome, the Palace is the largest and most dramatic of Myrtle Beach's entertainment theaters. It's also breaking the mold by replacing its music review with Le Grande Cirque, a spellbinding circus of circuses where aerialists dangle gracefully from the ceiling, wildly costumed dancers appear and disappear through veils of mist and acrobats festooned with wildly colorful headpieces careen through the air. Music ranging from electronica to classical is surprisingly appropriate, as are the well-timed comic moments, which keep the show light and fun. Bold and dramatic, the show is a gravitational wonder.

Promising the world's greatest tribute show, Legends in Concert with Calvin Gilmore delivers, with impersonators bringing Stevie Wonder, Celine Dion, Alan Jackson, Aretha Franklin and, of course, Elvis Presley to the Grand Strand. Originally staged in Las Vegas, award-winning Legends is the original celebrity tribute show and has been performed in 15 countries and on four continents since its first curtain call more than 20 years ago. Talented dancers add to the spectacle and performances change each year.

Offering some of the best entertainment in the Southeast, from Vegas-with-a-drawl to high-flying thrills, Myrtle Beach's entertainment theaters are a wonderful way to add a dose of culture to a beach vacation. And just think of the songs you can sing on the way home.

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