

Philadelphia's musical roots

In [Philadelphia](#) [Music](#) 03 February 2012 | By [Lindsay Davis](#)

Union Transfer, a new, bi-level space, is fast becoming one of the hottest venues for live music on the US east coast.

While jazz has early roots in New Orleans and Motown Records started in Detroit, Pennsylvania's largest city – more famously known as the birthplace of American independence – is home to a surprisingly eclectic mix of pioneering musical artists and new sounds.

Philly Soul songwriters **Kenneth Gamble** and **Leon Huff**, jazz great **John Coltrane**, rock and soul sensation **Patti Labelle**, hip-hop pioneers **The Roots**, punk rocker **Joan Jett**, rapper **Schoolly D**, neo soul artist **Jill Scott** and consummate entertainer **Will Smith** (once half of the unforgettable pop rap duo **DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince**) are just a few of the artists who put Philadelphia on America's musical map.

Related



Philadelphia's high-end restaurant battle

Local restaurateurs fight for dining domination

Today, the city's music scene continues to reflect its rich musical heritage. Established artists still call Philly home, while new venues and emerging local talent make the city a great stop for any music lover. So, get on board **the love train** (or, Amtrak) for a peek into the **freedom loving**, musical soul of Philadelphia.

Start at **World Cafe Live (WCL)**, a three million dollar space with two stages and incredible acoustics that marries the size, sophistication and cleanliness of an upscale theatre with a friendly, down-to-earth vibe. Founder Hal Real licensed the World Cafe name from radio station XPN in 2004, but besides sharing the same building, passion and "philosophy about the power of music", World Cafe Live (the venue) and World Cafe (the radio show, syndicated by **NPR**) operate independently of one another. WCL embraces local artists, many of whom built their followings at the venue's Philly Rising open mic nights or Monday Jazz Jams. Philly singer/songwriter Lizanne Knott, who performs often and runs the city's outpost of the **New York Songwriters' Circle** at WCL, called the atmosphere "respectful and like family". With 550 ticketed and 200 free shows a year, WCL hosts live music in just about every genre, including jazz, rock, folk and rap (Philly native **Queen Marie** stopped by in early January 2012). The cafe is also where artists often gain popularity before becoming global superstars -- Adele played four times before she got her big break and Corinne Bailey Rae was a chart-topping UK artist first introducing herself to US audiences when she played WCL in 2006.

Not far from WCL is **The Blockley Pourhouse**, a two-and-a-half-year-old nightclub in a space that was once a 19th-century insane asylum. More recently, The Blockley was the home of The Chestnut Club, a popular venue in the 1980s and 90s for iconic acts such as The Ramones, Violent Femmes, Iggy Pop, De La Soul, Nirvana and the Dave Matthews Band. With a small stage, wide dance floor and well-stocked bar, the Blockley's young, party atmosphere is perfect for a mix of alt rock, hip hop, electronic and rap shows, where local artists and regional/national acts play the 700-person, (primarily) standing-room-only space. **Dr. Fameus** (from local electronic jam band **Disco Biscuit**) and **Inspectah Deck** of Wu-Tang Clan played recently, while nostalgia is kept alive with monthly performances by Splinter's Sunlight, Philly's most popular Grateful Dead tribute band.

Two musts for indie rock are **Kung Fu Necktie** and veteran **Johnny Brenda's**, both located in Philly's Fishtown area and among the best spots in the country for indie music according to QD Tran, an editor at **The Deli**, a national indie music scene website. Kung Fu Necktie opened its doors in 2008 (two of its owners are from **Lit Lounge** on New York City's Lower East Side) and the weathered dive bar atmosphere is accented with kitschy, vintage items that could be from your eccentric aunt's private art collection (if your eccentric aunt plays pinball). You will find mostly local indie rock and local DJs, plus the occasional record launch party. At Johnny Brenda's, founded in 1967 by pro boxer Johnny Brenda and under new ownership since 2003, more established national indie rock bands like Tokyo Police Club, Dr Dog, Nada Surf and Fleet Foxes join the line up of local, emerging indie talent. The bi-level venue, which has an elevated stage, wraparound balcony and capacity for 250 people, draws a decidedly hipster crowd.

Philadelphia's musical roots

In [Philadelphia](#) [Music](#) 03 February 2012 | By [Lindsay Davis](#)

Related



Philadelphia's high-end restaurant battle

Local restaurateurs fight for dining domination

Towards the more eccentric end of the spectrum, there is PhilaMOCA, once a showroom for mausoleums and tombstones, now an art gallery, performance space and concert venue. Philly has a **dark history** and curator Hamza Khan said as far as musical acts go “the stranger the better”. Recently, the space held a harpist, **hurdy gurdy** player, flamed hula hoopers and a folk-punk variety show called Folktopia. Local indie rock favourites **Hop Along** also played the creepy chic room, which used to be home to Philly boy turned global superstar DJ Diplo’s Mausoleum dance raves. PhilaMOCA took over the space from Diplo in September 2010 and switched gears with its offerings of mostly indie music, chiptunes (synth music played through old Gameboys/Ataris) and alternative folk acts.

When Diplo returned to Philly for a gig in early January 2012, he took the stage at **Union Transfer** a new, bi-level venue with a state-of-the-art sound system and standing-room-only capacity for 1,200. With high ceilings, clear sightlines, multi-level balconies and three bars, Union Transfer is attracting top national and international talent in genres as varied as rock, funk, rap and hip hop. Recent shows include **SEE I (Feat. Members of Thievery Corp)**, UK band **Friendly Fires**, **Clap Your Hands and Say Yeah** and Brooklyn rapper **Theophilus London**, and with **Fountains of Wayne**, **The Joy Formidable** and Henry Rollins on the horizon, this four-month old concert hall is fast becoming one of the hottest venues for live music on the US east coast.

For a bit of retro action, two clubs will get you going with their nods to mod and disco. **The Barbary** (a rock music fixture since 1969) features the “**Bouffant Bangout**” dance party on the first Saturday of each month, where the DJs spin 1950s and ‘60s tracks for a crowd young enough to remember CDs, not vinyl. At **The Trestle Inn Whiskey and Go Go**, local DJs play disco, funk and doses of French pop for club goers while Go Go dancers on raised platforms (both the stage and the shoes) keep the crowds totally ramped.

There is a small, hidden gem inside Philly’s musical soul where you can take in emerging local artists like **The Lawsuits**, **The Spinning Leaves** and spoken word artist **MsWise** in the most intimate of spaces -- someone’s living room. Brought to you by Sofar Sounds (which started in London), this international small space, concert movement unites music lovers in secret living room locations. Always on the cutting edge of something new, Philadelphia is one of just 15 cities participating, and you can sign up through the **Sofar Sounds website**.

“For years I was able to have people come to Philadelphia. There were The Roots [Philly’s hometown hip hop heroes] and great musicians in town that enticed people to come to the city,” said legendary Grammy Award winning arranger, producer and cellist, Larry Gold, who recently sold The Studio, his state-of-the-art recording complex catering to platinum and gold selling artists, to **Milkboy Recording**. The sale and renaming of the space to “Milkboy the Studio” is generating some great buzz for **Milkboy Philly** nightclub. The two level venue features every genre, from jazz to singer/songwriters to hip hop, in a 200-person, standing-room space. Like most Philadelphia venues, Milkboy Philly has an energetic scene, but lacks pretension.

“It’s not if you look a certain way. It’s if you play a certain way,” said producer **Khari Mateen**. “We’re not super sexy like NY or LA, but we’ve got soul.”