

Casey Boddie's love of music is older than dirt. Born in Shreveport and raised in Mooringsport, Boddie started singing the same way all her friends did: in church. She debuted her talent in front of God and congregation at the ripe age of 7 with Dolly Parton's "Coat of Many Colors." It would launch her years of singing at festivals and pageants.

Dreaming of a career in the music business, Boddie moved to Nashville after college. But it wasn't until she returned to Louisiana to be near family that she took a job at Horseshoe Casino & Hotel (711 Horseshoe Blvd., Bossier City; 1-800-895-0711; caesars.com/horseshoe-bossier-city), where she saw not one, but two dreams realized.

When Loretta Lynn came to perform [in 2013], "I was in total awe," says Boddie. As Horseshoe's entertainment manager, she books national, regional and local acts into the casino's multiple venues. Off the clock, she sings and performs across the state.

"I've seen hundreds of concerts. Hundreds," says Boddie. "And we see a lot of stars come through here. But Loretta — she's my idol. When I was a little kid, she came to Louisiana but I was too young to see her perform in a casino."

Her voice still swells with excitement as she remembers that night.

By *Sara Hudson*

GAMBLERS, GATORS & A-LIST MUSIC MAKERS

The new faces of Louisiana's casino entertainment venues



♠
*Better Than Ezra
at Harrah's Casino
in New Orleans*

“Little did I know that one of my friends had a plan to get her to autograph some records for me as a Christmas gift,” says Boddie. “Everyone was in on it — including Loretta!”

Decades after she started her own career in her church nave, Boddie not only had a job in the biz — but she finally got to meet her idol.

“To me, that’s what entertainment at casinos is all about,” she says. “These incredible, unmatched moments where you get to interact with larger-than-life stars in an intimate setting — right there where you can almost reach out and touch them.”

While some states might consider a pack of cards the devil’s prayer-book, in Louisiana, you don’t have to pray hard to find a casino. Over the last decade, palatial new casinos like **L’Auberge Casino & Resort** (777 L’Auberge Ave., Baton Rouge; 225-215-7777; lbatonrouge.com), **Golden Nugget Lake Charles**, (2550 Golden Nugget Blvd., Lake Charles; 337-508-7777; goldennuggetlc.com) and the Horseshoe Casino & Hotel have become almost as common as preternaturally gifted musicians with the last name “Neville.” Along with established casinos like **Harrah’s New Orleans** (8 Canal Street, New Orleans; 1-800-427-7247; harrahneworleans.com) and **Paragon Casino Resort** (Highway 1, Marksville; 1-800-WIN-1-WIN; paragoncasinoresort.com), Louisiana casinos have redefined performance opportunities between Houston and Atlanta — and they’re bringing Louisiana flair to the next generation of casino entertainment to boot.

“There used to be more of a stigma about playing what people called the ‘casino circuit,’” says Fred Martinez, Entertainment Director at Harrah’s New Orleans. “It used to be to be, ‘Oh, if you’re on the casino circuit, you’re pretty much done.’ Today, it’s anything but — casinos are places where the A-List stars are welcome and where they want to be.”

An increase in more diverse entertainment options at casinos in Louisiana reflects larger national trends. Between 2005 and 2014, Las Vegas’ casinos entertainment and retail profits rose 4 percent, but gaming revenue fell 6.2 percent. In the same period, Vegas casino entertainment

and retail averaged 46.2 percent of total casino revenue, but gaming made up only 35.9 percent revenue.

Translation? It’s a gamer’s world, but gamers aren’t playing. What are they doing? Eating, drinking, singing and dancing. A lot.

In Louisiana, large venues like The Lawn at L’Auberge, the Riverdome at Horseshoe, and the Grand Event Center at Golden Nugget Lake Charles offer crowds and amenities that draw varied household name headliners. Offerings include country musicians like Gary Allen, Billy Currington and Kelsea Ballerini; TV stars such as Troy Landry of the History Channel’s “Swamp People” and Robert Irvine from the Food Network; musicals including “Chicago”; stand-up comedians like Tracy Morgan and Bill Engvall; Top 100 recording artists such as Pitbull and Mary J. Blige; Louisiana’s homegrown homeboys Better than Ezra; or legends like Loretta Lynn and Willie Nelson.

In addition to bringing in talent from across the United States, casinos can become part of the catapult that ricochets local talent into national spotlights.

“Blake Shelton played here numerous times before he got big,” remembers Mark Jeffers, director of entertainment operations at Paragon. “We also had Ryan Bingham before anyone knew him. Less than a year later, he won a Golden Globe.”

With Louisiana offering local talent as rich and fertile as its soil, it’s not surprising that local performers have taken to the increased options casinos’ venues offer. Smaller casino bars and lounges like The Edge at L’Auberge, Club MeZazz at Paragon, and Blue Martini and Rush Lounge at Golden Nugget Lake Charles offer relaxed nights out where you can hear local acts, as well as sing karaoke, watch a movie, compete in trivia contests or kick back and enjoy a burlesque show, any day of the week.

Tickets at casinos work differently than non-casino venues. For each show, entertainment managers such as Kim Ginn, vice president of marketing at L’Auberge, decide how many tickets to comp for her local gamers, versus how many to sell to the public.

UPCOMING SHOWS

GOLDEN NUGGET LAKE CHARLES (GRAND EVENT CENTER)

September

2 The Commodores, 8:30 p.m.

4 Terry Fator and The Noise, 8 p.m.

10 BJ Thomas & Gary Puckett, 8 p.m.

23 Brenda Lee, 8:30 p.m.

October

7 Pat Green, Oct 7, 8:30 p.m.

8 Cheech & Chong, 8 p.m.; tickets go on sale 7/8

14 38 Special, 8:30 p.m. tickets go on sale on 7/15

15 Charlie Daniels Band, 8 p.m.

21 Marshall Tucker Band, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 7/22

22 ZZ Top, 8 p.m.

29 Neil Sedaka, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 7/29

November

5 Rick Springfield, 8 p.m.

11 Grits & Glamour Tour, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 7/22

12 Ronnie Milsap, 8 p.m.; tickets go on sale 7/29

18 Willie Nelson, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 8/12

19 Oak Ridge Boys Christmas Show, 8 p.m.; tickets go on sale 8/19

December

3 Loverboy, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 9/2

17 Loretta Lynn, 8:30 p.m.; tickets go on sale 8/26

They also have live entertainment in Blue Martini, Rush Lounge, H2O Pool + Bar and The Country Club.



♠
*Three Dog Night
at the Golden Nugget
in Lake Charles*



♠
*Billy Carrington
 at the Horseshoe Casino
 in Bossier City*



♠
*Kathy Griffin
 at the L'Auberge Casino
 in Baton Rouge*

“Everything we do is based on [an] understanding of what our audience wants,” she says. A high-rolling VIP might get offers for one, two free tickets from the casino, depending on their level, what the show is, and retail demand the casino anticipates.

Gaming audiences tend to skew older than the average concertgoer. Because of this, casinos opens doors for all ages to find beloved entertainment options, explains Shelli Briery, public relations manager at Horseshoe. She has worked casino entertainment in Louisiana her entire adult life.

“One person might think one star is a ‘has been,’ but to other folks, he or she is a legend,” Briery says. “A casino show might be someone’s chance to see Merle Haggard for the last time. To see George Jones for the last time.”

Fellow Louisiana casino veteran Ron Richey, director of entertainment at Golden Nugget Lake Charles, agrees.

“We do younger acts for retail, but for many of our core gaming constituency, we’re bringing people back to high school, back to when they were teenagers. By offering a wide variety of entertainment, we offer something for everyone.”

Indeed, if variety is the spice of life, Louisiana casino entertainment might best be understood as the Tony Chachere’s aisle at Rouses.

“I’ve been here at [Paragon] 22 years,” says Jeffers. “We’ve always done much more than music. We’ve filmed the Price is Right. We’ve had ice-skating. That’s right, in Louisiana. Ice-skating. They have a product called Glice and they lay it right down on the floor. We’ve had numerous Cirque du Soleil shows. We’ve had boxing. We’ve had MMA [mixed martial arts]. We’ve had a ventriloquist.”

Of course, it wouldn’t truly be Louisiana entertainment without a few festivals in the closet — or gators on the bayou. At The Lawn, the sprawling outdoor venue at L’Auberge, up to 3,500 people can enjoy everything from a classic car show to local festivals.

“This year, we collaborated with the Louisiana Hospitality Foundation to put

on the Red Stick Festival,” says Ginn. “The foundation is a nonprofit and all proceeds went back to it. We had Galatoire’s, Sullivan’s [Steakhouse], Ruffino’s [Restaurant], you name it.”

Eighty miles down I-10, Harrah’s New Orleans regularly highlights local talent with international reputations.

“The biggest thing that’s stuck out in my career here was hosting Allen Toussaint’s 75th birthday party with local affiliate WLAE,” says Martinez. “Irma Thomas, Elvis Costello, John Cleary — even Dr. John, it was such a powerful day. To be part of it, of course, but also not knowing we would lose him in a couple of years.

“We did a private ceremony with family and friends before show. A little thing, you know, with cake and ice cream like anyone would have. To be a part of that was to see how much his family loved him, and how much he loved his fans. I will never forget that.”

While New Orleans infuses urban Louisiana into the national casino circuit, Paragon has inimitable country Louisiana experiences down to a T — or, perhaps, a G.

“We have live ‘gators in our lobby and a live feeding show every Saturday at noon, 2 p.m., and 5 p.m.,” says Jeffers. “It’s that popular. It’s free and open to the public. It’s part of the bayou feature in front of our movie theaters. All our shows are first-run films. It’s just like going to a regular movie theater to see a new release. Except, you know. With gators.”

Ron Richey sums up the allure.

“Casinos are a place you go to get entertainment, and want to stay for everything else. If you are 21, you can pretty much come here and do anything you want and have a good time. [At Golden Nugget Lake Charles,] you can play golf, you can play tennis, you can swim, you can catch a show, you can place a bet, and you can go to the beach. You can go on a fishing trip, a hunting trip, you can charter a boat. At the end of the day, we have it all. Louisiana is a special place and special market.”

[And to that, we say, Amen.]

HARRAH'S NEW ORLEANS

September

17 Mondo Burlesque, 8 p.m.; tickets at ticketmaster.com

December

16 & 17 Beatles versus Stones, 8 p.m.; tickets at harrahneworleans.com and ticketmaster.com

L'AUBERGE CASINO & HOTEL

September

16 Better Than Ezra, 9 p.m.

November

4 Rodney Atkins, 8 p.m.

26 Delbert McClinton, 8 p.m.

December

9 Aaron Neville: Dec 9, Doors 7 p.m./Show 8 p.m.

HORSESHOE BOSSIER CITY

September

16 Gary Allan, 8 p.m.

October

TBA Jamey Johnson

21 The Molly Ringwalds @ Monster Ball, 8 p.m.

22 Heart, 8 p.m.

November

5 Olivia Newton-John, 8 p.m.

Tickets at riverdome.com or through Ticketmaster.

PARAGON CASINO RESORT

September

4 Patti La Belle, 8 p.m.

October

29 Melissa Etheridge, 8 p.m.

November

26 Brian McKnight, 8 p.m.