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Illustration by Otto Steininger

Rock of All Ages

The stage is new. So are many of the bands. But Southgate House is still a great old club.

By Larry Nager

Abraham Lincoln visited here. Ralph Stanley picked here. The White Stripes rocked here. Townes Van Zandt folked here. On Third Street, east of the Taylor Southgate Bridge, stands the region's oldest, coolest, and most eclectic club. "Oldest" and "coolest" almost never go together (sorry, Senator McCain). Except when you're talking about the most widely celebrated live-music venue on either side of the Ohio—Newport's Southgate House. Operating in its current incarnation since 1981, in a building nearly two centuries old, it's a haven for alternative rock, bluegrass, blues, Americana, and almost anything else people might pay a cover to hear.

Don't take my word. In May 2007, Southgate House was cited as one of America's 40 best music clubs by the indie music magazine Paste. Just this past March, when *Spin's* "Rock City" feature set its sights on Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, Southgate House topped the "Bars and Clubs" list. Music Hall got a *Spin* shout-out, too, but at a mere 130 years old, it's a pimply adolescent next to venerable Southgate House.

It isn't just the music that's diverse; the club itself has multiple personalities. It's renowned as a cutting-edge alternative temple, yet Southgate House remains a family owned neighborhood bar with a down-home flair that sits, ironically, across from Newport on the Levee, the massive entertainment mall that, conventional wisdom says, is the future of Northern Kentucky.

At the helm is Ross Raleigh, owner of Southgate House for half his 64 years. He's a natural host, whose sly, welcoming grin and ever-ready chuckle are reminiscent of a slightly disreputable, flask-sharing uncle. Ross combined his passions for music and history in this white elephant, as packed with maintenance issues as it is with a colorful past. It's Ross who wrangled the building onto the National Register of Historic Places, and Ross who has kept it going through changing tastes and an even more radically changing Newport landscape.

These days, he's getting a hand from his daughter, Morrella. And with the help of some of the area's best musical minds, they're setting the stage for this Northern Kentucky landmark's third century.

ROSS HAD NO business plan 32 years ago, when he picked up Southgate House for a mere \$65,000. Even at that price, it seemed like Raleigh's Folly. Newport was at a nadir. The casinos and most legitimate businesses were long gone and property values had plummeted. It was Cincinnati's Tijuana, a destination point for cheap alcohol, cigarettes, and more illicit pleasures. But Ross saw it with the love-struck eyes of a music fan and an amateur historian. There'd been live music at Southgate House since 1923, when the Knights of Columbus added a ballroom to the back of what was then their meeting hall. He figured he could build on that tradition. And he was fascinated with the building's non-musical past.

Built in 1814 by British prisoners from the War of 1812, it was the grand residence of Richard Southgate, a military man, merchant, and silk manufacturer. It was Southgate who hosted Abraham Lincoln in 1856, when the future president was just a lawyer with political ambitions. Neither was an abolitionist at that point, but according to Raleigh, Southgate was a sympathizer. In fact, he's convinced that the characters of Arthur Shelby and Augustine St. Claire, the "benevolent" slave owners in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were modeled after Southgate. "Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband were good friends of the Southgates when they lived in Cincinnati," Raleigh says.

Southgate died in 1857 but the house stayed in the family; Southgate's great-grandson, John T. Thompson, was born there in 1860. Thompson followed family tradition and attended West Point, but then chose weaponry over silk. He perfected his Thompson submachine gun during World War I, too late for our Doughboys. Instead, the Tommy Gun played a prominent role in the Prohibition-era battles between bootleggers and cops. At that point, Southgate House was no longer a private residence. The Knights of Columbus bought it in 1914 and Raleigh bought it from them in 1976. "I thought it was worth preserving," he says of his decision.

After a failed stab at running it as a country bar called Mom's Opry, he reopened in October 1981 as a more eclectic venue. "I've been there nonstop since then," he says. Along the way he has done everything from booking bands to pouring drinks. "We always got into the different forms of music—bluegrass, big band, jazz, all that—from the very beginning," he explains. "The punk rockers were in there for a while. Then there was heavy metal."

Today, Southgate House is at the center of Northern Kentucky's revival. But when Raleigh reopened Southgate House, it was pretty much Newport's only live entertainment in which the entertainers kept their clothes on. "There was no live music anywhere around here," he says, recalling that the only activity across the street, "was an Oldsmobile dealership and some private homes, and a fortune-teller that had her little neon sign up—'Madame Lena,' I think. You could see the river from the second floor," he says. "Now you can't. Progress, y'know."

MORRELLA RALEIGH GREW up watching Ross put on shows at Southgate House, and followed that career path. She's been in the concert business since 1994, starting as Cincinnati Arts Association assistant manager. Today, she's Nederlander Entertainment's director of marketing and public relations at U.S. Bank Arena.

She has her father's ready grin, hearty laugh, and taste for roots music and rockabilly (and, in her case, the flashy red hair and vintage dresses that go with it). She's taken a more active role as her dad's heart problems have slowed him down, helping balance the books and overseeing recent renovations, including a new stage and new plumbing fixtures. "It's amazing," she says, releasing one of her big laughs, "I never knew how excited I could get about toilets."

Most places would have a hard time digesting those changes without turning to the dark side of big ticket prices and service fees. But the Southgate House has a gatekeeper. It remains Ross's place, the walls covered with old portraits of presidents and assorted generals and dignitaries; the display cases are filled with awards, T-shirts, and artifacts. And though Morrella brings big-time experience to the Southgate House business plan, she's also walking a fine line—preserving its eccentricities amid updates and upgrades.

In July 2007, she hired Southgate's general manager, Rick McCarty, a fellow concert vet from Clear Channel and Live Nation, but one with deep roots in local music. He plays in the band Ampline and runs local indie label Tiberius Records. The newest blood is Ian Bolender, 25, who joined this spring to book acts appealing to fellow twentysomethings. He plays in local band Ellison.

Southgate's independent promoters still book shows there, too, including John Madden, the man most responsible for bringing Southgate House national attention. His Magus Productions (now JBM) started bringing national shows there in the early 1990s, booking night-to-remember events such as Texas singer/songwriters Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark (on the same bill!); roots rock masters the V-Roys and NRBQ; blues icon Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown; and bluegrass greats Jimmy Martin and Ralph Stanley. "John's helped the Southgate out a lot," says Ross. The feeling is mutual. "It's my favorite room in the world," Madden says. "If I could, I'd do everything at the Southgate House."

In fact, Madden, Southgate House, and WNKU-FM are a sort of Holy Trinity for the region's folk, Americana, and bluegrass lovers. WNKU played that music to a growing local audience, and Madden booked those artists into the Southgate House, opening the market to events like the ambitious 1999, 2003, and 2006 Tall Stacks Music & Heritage Festivals. Many headliners on those impressive lineups had been introduced to local audiences by the WNKU-Madden-Southgate combination.

Southgate also gave the area early looks at such future rock stars as White Stripes, Black Keys, Arcade Fire, Modest Mouse, Of Montreal, and the late Elliott Smith. Dan McCabe, who got his start at Short Vine's punk/alt-rock mecca Sudsy Malone's, does shows at Southgate through his Thigmatrope Productions. And the rooms of the rambling mansion played host to McCabe's Lite Brite Indie Pop and Film Test—the sort of iconoclastic entertainment the Knights of Columbus never could have foreseen.

THE ODD, PIECEMEAL nature of the building is a big part of what makes the Southgate House unique. There's a small room just off Junie's Lounge—the downstairs bar—where you'll find the jukebox and a display case of memorabilia. Across from Junie's is the billiards room, where Ross says you'll find the remaining original Southgate floor, complete with huge yellow poplar beams.

Upstairs is the Parlour, a smaller venue with newly upgraded sound system and bathroom fixtures, but with all the same vintage paintings, ancient books, and antique carved and gilded benches that fans have come to expect. "I adore performing in the Parlour upstairs, with those bookcases on either side of the stage," says McCabe, a veteran of local bands Roundhead and Campfire Crush.

The Ballroom is the center of Southgate House's universe and it's gotten the

most attention. In January, McCarty oversaw construction of a higher, wider stage, as well as installation of a new sound system and red curtain that Morrella made sure replicates, as closely as possible, the club's trademark backdrop. "We joke about selling pieces of the old curtain on eBay like the Beatles' bedsheets," she says with another laugh.

The Southgate's musical "regulars" weighed in on plans for the bigger stage. McCarty says it was "conceived, engineered, and constructed all by musicians, basically. So it feels better, it looks better, it sounds better."

"It's really the best stage in the area," agrees McCabe. "They did it right."

More improvements are planned, but everybody here knows there's a mojo that shouldn't be messed with.

"The Ballroom itself, I think *magic* is the right word for it," says Morrella. "It just has a certain feel. We talk about redecorating it, but what can we do with it to make it feel better, to make it more welcoming than it already is?"

McCarty agrees. "We don't want to lose that little edginess that exists here, the cool-factor of the house."

THE BEST WAY to experience Southgate House is a whole-house event, when the Parlour, Junie's Lounge, and the Ballroom are all in action. During events like MidPoint Music Festival, Lite Brite, Jake Speed's Rivertown Breakdown, Cincy Punk Fest, and Kelly Thomas's Rivertown Music Club gatherings, the Southgate walls are galvanized with the excitement of people making—and enjoying—music. "Those are the best nights," says Morrella.

Of course, Southgate House isn't the only place hoping to be first to present the Next Big Thing. The 600-capacity club faces competition from Covington's Madison Theater (capacity 1,400). But for now, with McCarty and Bolender working in-house and Madden and McCabe regularly bringing in shows, Southgate House has a busy fall and winter; by late summer, most October dates had been booked. "I think we've got a good crew down there now," Ross told me back in August. Call it Southgate House: The Next Generation. While Madden brings in the boomers, Bolender wants their kids. An intern at U.S Bank Arena when he met Morrella, Bolender's most important previous experience came at two of the most cutting-edge NKY clubs, Radio Down and the Mad Hatter.

"The only thing I didn't like about the Southgate House before was that it appealed to one small group of people," he says. "It felt like they ignored whole genres of music. I'm just going to make it a little bit more diverse." His plan is to bring in more bands on the rise, which he began in mid-August with We Are Scientists.

But he likes the club's cluttered diversity and hopes to keep it that way. "That's what's so cool about coming here," Bolender says. His job now is exposing his contemporaries—24-year-olds who've never stepped inside. To reach them, he's utilizing the newest—and oldest—methods, from Internet social networking to putting leaflets into people's hands. "I don't really hold much stock in radio or print," he explains. "It's new media and actually just getting out on the street and passing out fliers. That's how you do it."

McCarty hopes to balance locals and nationals. "There's no way we can survive without the support of the local music scene," he says. "But at the same time, the big complaint you always hear from people around here is all these [national] bands skip town. We want to do everything we can to make sure we're bringing all the best touring acts through town as much as we can and, at the same time, supporting the local music scene as best we can."

That won't change, promises Morrella. "I think that's one of the really unique things about Southgate House. We do have all the national and regional bands that are really great, but when there is a local event with a lot of local bands.... That's when Southgate House really comes alive."

As the house historian looks ahead to Southgate's bicentennial in 2014, almost 20 percent of its history will have been made on his watch. Ross Raleigh says he's ready to make more. "The bottom line, of course, is just to keep the place preserved for its history," he says. "And not just American history. There's a rich musical history here which needs to be preserved for future generations."

So maybe "oldest" and "coolest" aren't mutually exclusive. There's a timelessness here that never goes out of style. Southgate House is sort of the giant redwood of our music scene. "It's a gem, there's nothing like it around here," gushes McCabe. "I get a lot of bands that come through and compare it to European venues, where the state funds these old historic places and they build them into music venues."

No one's funding her dad, says Morrella. "I'm really proud of him. He's kept it going himself, all without any corporate or government dollars. As a child, I didn't realize any of that. I just thought it was a cool place. And I still think it's a cool place."

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