

# LONDON TIMES

Asbury Park, where the Boss cut his teeth, has been rocking for 50 years.  
It's not about to turn down the volume, says **Nick Rufford**

*Nick Rufford* Published: 11 May 2014



We built this city on rock'n'roll: Springsteen, Asbury Park's most famous son (Greg Allen/Rex) Head out of New York City through the Holland Tunnel, south on the 95 and east on the 33, and the gritty landscape gives way to beach bars, boardwalks and the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. This is the north Jersey shore, a one-time playground for New Yorkers who escaped here from the traffic and summer heat — before they discovered package holidays in Florida and Hawaii.

It's also one of the birthplaces of American music. The strip of coastal towns is arguably to rock what Nashville is to country music and New Orleans is to jazz. You can't cross the street on the 14-mile strip of cafes, restaurants and beachfront homes that runs from Long Branch to Manasquan without tripping over a gem of rock history. U2, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones all played some of their first American concerts here. At the risk of giving away my age, I'm going to venture that this is every bit as important as a pilgrimage to the Cavern Club. I came, to be honest, half hoping to bump into Bruce Springsteen, who honed his songwriting skills in the seaside bars of Asbury Park, the epicentre of the strip.

Now there are signs that the Shore's glory days may be about to return. Rebuilding is still going on after the devastation wreaked by Sandy in 2012, but money from the government's emergency fund has breathed new life into the area, reversing decades of decline. Shops that were boarded up long before the storm are reopening, boardwalks and piers long closed down are suddenly back in vogue.

And Asbury Park is recovering its former reputation as a mecca for rock music. Bands thrived here when there were holiday crowds to entertain; slowly, summer visitors are returning. A whole new scene is developing (see guide, below), and among the acts on an outdoor stage from June through to August will be Lynyrd Skynyrd, Rebelution and Drive-By Truckers ([stoneponyonline.com](http://stoneponyonline.com)).

If you want to be a part of it, you can hire a car or travel by rail from Penn station, in Manhattan. The line runs the length of the north Jersey shore and is an experience in itself as it trundles through the seaside towns, with their pastel-painted houses and pink hydrangeas growing in reefs like coral in the salty Atlantic air.

If you want a guide, then a couple of enterprising local journalists, Stan Goldstein and Jean Mickle, provide guided tours. The first port of call is Asbury Park's Convention Hall, a magnificent old beachside theatre that this year celebrates 50 years of hosting rock bands. In 1964, Moe Septee, a Broadway producer, took over concert promotions and attracted a list of stars few other venues have rivalled. They included the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Clash, Led Zeppelin, the Doors and Black Sabbath.

Across the street is the Wonder Bar, which once claimed the longest bar in the world, and further down Ocean Avenue is the Stone Pony. The latter is "one of America's most famous music scenes", according to Stan and Jean, its walls adorned with autographed guitars and rock memorabilia. Both offer music, booze, pub grub and Springsteen lore. (He's played both places, but sadly he's not there when I visit.) Next stop is the site of the Fast Lane, where U2 played in 1981, as did Jon Bon Jovi in the days when he was performing as John Bongiovi and the Wild Ones. (He's still a local). Other acts who honed their style here include the Ramones, George Thorogood and the Runaways.

Sadly, the once thriving venue was torn down before it could benefit from the Hurricane Sandy effect. The Upstage Club, on Cookman Avenue, where Springsteen recruited the original members of the E Street Band, is also closed, but two doors down is the Asbury Park Musical Heritage Foundation, the closest the area has to a rock'n'roll museum. You can wander in and see a fabulous collection of pictures of the Shore in its heyday.

Time for a heart-attack brunch special at the Langosta Lounge, across the road from the Stone Pony: slow-roasted southern fried egg and pork with cheese and fries. Springsteen is a customer, apparently, but not when I'm there. Seems I'm out of luck.

I don't give up. The Boss is a regular performer in Asbury Park — he describes it as his adopted home — but during my visit I hear he's tied up with a gig down the coast in North Carolina. Not ideal, but figuring that where Bruce is, the spirit of Asbury Park is also, I mosey on over to see if I can say hello. And I do, sort of: the mid-concert handshake may have been rushed, but it meant a lot. Like the Convention Hall, in Asbury, he celebrates half a century of rock'n'roll this year. Judging from the sellout crowd and the cheers when he says "Keep the fire [of rock music] burning, people", there's a revival going on.

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## NEED TO KNOW

### Where to stay

**The grand Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel**, next to the Convention Hall, evokes a bygone era: many of its recently restored rooms overlook the beach (doubles from £75; [berkeleyhotelnj.com](http://berkeleyhotelnj.com)). Or try the stylish 19th-century **Laingdon** (doubles from £100; [laingdonhotel.com](http://laingdonhotel.com)), or the trendy, gay-friendly **Empress** (doubles from £155; [asburyempress.com](http://asburyempress.com)).

### **Where to eat**

At **Frank's Deli & Restaurant** (1406 Main Street), you might see three generations of the same Asbury clan behind the counter. Go for the pork roll, egg and cheese sandwich. **Jimmy's Italian Restaurant** (1405 Asbury Avenue) is a typical Jersey Italian, with booths, mirrors and photos of the late Jimmy with Sinatra, Nixon and Springsteen. The customers could have stepped straight out of the Sopranos. For your chance to spot the Boss at the **Langosta Lounge**, it's at 1000 Ocean Avenue.

### **The tour**

Stan and Jean's Rock and Roll Tour of the Jersey Shore starts at £74 for two hours or £133 for four hours, based on a group of four ([njrockmap.com](http://njrockmap.com)).

### **The venues**

The **Stone Pony's** closure was a symbol of Asbury Park's decline. With support from Springsteen, it reopened and now hosts some of the Shore's best music, including the Gaslight Anthem. If it's too loud and raucous, you can retire to the back bar — where it's just raucous. **Kings of Leon, the Lemonheads,**

**Ben Folds Five and Stereophonics have played the Saint.** It's cosy, with a capacity of just 150, and has a decent bar and an excellent sound system ([thesaintnj.com](http://thesaintnj.com)).

**For local bands, check out Wonder Bar,** which also hosts some British acts and, unusually for a rock venue, serves decent food ([wonderbarasburypark.com](http://wonderbarasburypark.com)).

**Asbury Lanes** is a vintage bowling alley and bar with live rock and punk, burlesque, dance parties, film and art shows ([asburylanes.com](http://asburylanes.com)).

### **Getting there**

Airlines flying to New York include British Airways, Delta Air Lines and, from July, Norwegian

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