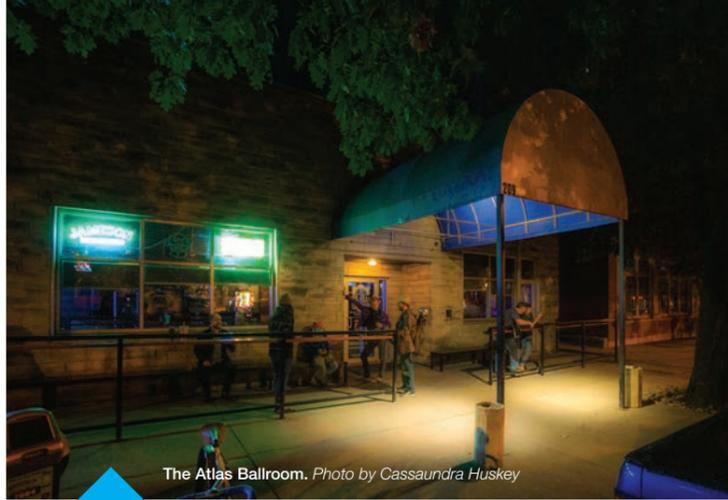


BLOOMINGTON NIGHTLIFE



By Molly Brush

Like the city itself, Bloomington's nightlife scene is vibrant, diverse, and always evolving. Whether you're looking for live music or theater, stand-up comedy, dancing, karaoke, trivia, or simply a good martini, you can find it in Bloomington's pubs, clubs, and theaters.



The Atlas Ballroom. Photo by Cassandra Huskey

The Atlas Ballroom

Located south of the downtown Square, The Atlas Ballroom might be best known for its jukebox and for having Skee-Ball machines in the back. Open seven days a week from 5 p.m. until 3 a.m., the bar offers 10 local, regional, and import beers on tap, and another two dozen in cans or bottles, a small wine selection, and top-shelf liquor.

209 S. College
theatlasballroom.com

The Back Door

“We’re here, we’re queer. Let’s party.” That’s the motto of The Back Door, Bloomington’s only queer bar. “It’s important for us to be here for the queer community,” co-owner Smoove Gardner says of the bar, which opened in 2013.

Located on South College behind The Atlas Ballroom, The Back Door is open seven nights a week, with entertainment and drink specials almost every night. The bar regularly hosts drag and burlesque shows, live music, dance parties, karaoke, and more. Each Wednesday night, aspiring drag and burlesque performers have a chance to hone their skills on Envy’s Open Stage, Bloomington’s only gender-based performance open mic.

Though The Back Door is first and foremost a space for the queer community, the bar welcomes straight and cisgender allies. “It’s a place where you can come and be yourself—see a show, dance, and have fun,” Gardner says.

207 S. College
bckdoor.com

Bear’s Place

No list of Bloomington nightlife spots would be complete without mention of the venerable Bear’s Place, home of the legendary Hairy Bear cocktail and the long-running weekly jazz series Jazz Fables.

“It’s been a staple in Bloomington since the early ’70s,” says Andrew Thomas, who owns Bear’s with his wife, Devin.

Since buying Bear’s five years ago, the Thomases say they have focused on providing a memorable customer experience for the establishment’s diverse clientele, which Andrew describes as “a melting pot” that includes the Indiana University community as well as locals and visitors. “We try to present ourselves as a place where everyone can gather,” he says.

In addition to updating the food menu and expanding drink options, the Thomases have renovated the event room to provide improved facilities for Jazz Fables and other regular events, which include karaoke, open mic nights for comedians and songwriters, and pub trivia. Though they’ve made some changes, they’ve also been careful to keep doing what Bear’s has always done well—in other words, the Hairy Bear isn’t going anywhere.

1316 E. 3rd St.
bearsplacebar.com



Jazz musician Pat Harbison outside Bear’s Place. Photo by Steve Raymer



A cabaret performance at The Back Door. Photo by Jeremy Hogan

The Bishop

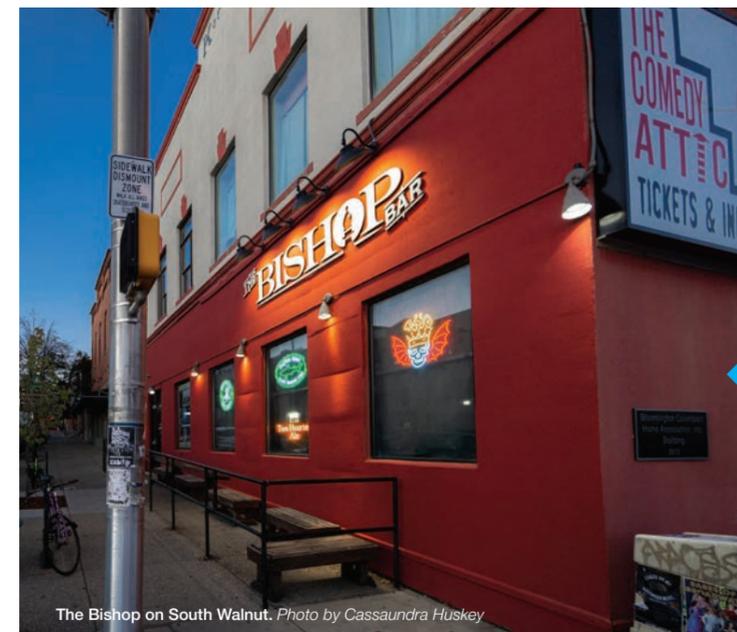
In the 10 years since it opened, The Bishop has built a reputation as one of the top places in Bloomington for live music, from local bands to national touring acts. Its unique configuration, with the bar and the stage in two separate rooms, allows The Bishop to admit patrons ages 18 and up to shows while reserving the bar area for those 21 and older.

“It’s a bar, but then it also has an event space attached,” says owner Stephen Westrich. Though primarily a music venue, The Bishop regularly hosts events such as poetry slams and book launch parties.

Specializing in craft beer and cocktails, the bar is open every day, show or no show, and there is no cover charge. It has a loyal following that has grown organically, says Westrich, who describes it as “a place built by regulars.”

Whether patrons are there for a show, a drink, or both, The Bishop strives to provide “an honest, comfortable experience that is authentic to Bloomington,” says Westrich. “Our goal is to be unpretentious.”

123 S. Walnut
thebishopbar.com



The Bishop on South Walnut. Photo by Cassandra Huskey

Blockhouse Bar

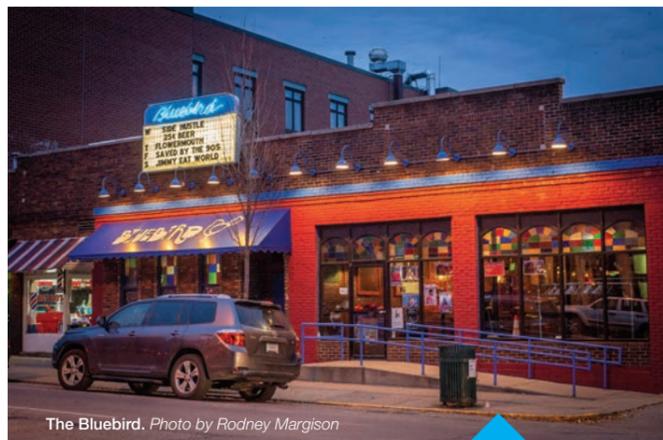
A relative newcomer to Bloomington nightlife, Blockhouse Bar opened in late 2016. Musicians David James, Drake Ritter, and Andrew Beargie started using the space at 205 S. College in 2014 to record music, teach music lessons, and hold the occasional show. As the number of events increased, creating an entertainment venue and bar seemed like the next step. "It just was a natural pivot a couple years into having the space," James says.

Blockhouse hosts events four or five nights each week. Tuesday nights start with an open mic, followed by a honky-tonk performance by the house band. Wednesday nights are devoted to jazz. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights feature performances in a variety of musical genres, along with the occasional karaoke night. Whether or not there is an event scheduled, the bar is open Tuesday through Saturday from 7 p.m. until late.

205 S. College
blockhousebar.com



Performers at Blockhouse Bar. Photo by Wes Lasher



The Bluebird. Photo by Rodney Margison

The Bluebird Nightclub

The Bluebird has been a fixture of the Bloomington nightlife scene since 1973. Known affectionately as The Bird, the storied nightclub hosts performers in a sweeping range of musical genres, from jazz and country to rock and reggae. Its eclectic offerings attract a diverse audience that includes college students, locals, and visitors.

Over the years, famous musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Lou Reed, Lucinda Williams, John Mayer, and southern Indiana's own John Mellencamp have graced The Bluebird stage. But the club offers more than big-name talent—it regularly features up-and-coming artists, including local and regional acts. And of course, many an aspiring singer has taken the stage during one of The Bluebird's regular karaoke nights.

Nearly half a century after it opened, The Bluebird has established itself as one of the premier music venues not just in Indiana, but in the entire country. In 2016, it was named one of the 100 greatest American music venues by music-industry publication *Consequence of Sound*.

216 N. Walnut
thebluebird.ws

C3

For those willing to venture beyond downtown, C3 provides an alternative to the college bar scene. The locally owned cocktail bar and restaurant is located on the east side of Bloomington in the upscale Renwick Village Center, about three miles from the Square. "We're a little bit off the beaten path as far as Bloomington goes," says Allison Smith, C3's general manager.

C3's handcrafted cocktails are "strongly influenced by classic cocktail culture," Smith says. "We're known for our Old-Fashioneds." The cocktail menu has more than 20 different mixed drinks, including nonalcoholic options, plus a selection of wine and beer. The restaurant offers seasonal cuisine, with a standard menu that changes about three times a year, and specials that rotate throughout the week.

C3 features live jazz on most Thursday nights, and also periodically hosts wine and spirit tastings. And though its sophisticated ambiance typically attracts an older crowd, it's not overly formal, says Smith. "It feels adult without being stuffy," she says.

1505 S. Piazza Drive
c3bloomington.com



C3 in Renwick Village Center. Courtesy photo

The Comedy Attic

Thanks to The Comedy Attic, Bloomington is home to perhaps the best small-city comedy scene in the country. Consistently ranked as one of the nation's top comedy clubs, The Comedy Attic attracts top-tier national comedians like Maria Bamford, Tig Notaro, Margaret Cho, W. Kamau Bell, and Michael Ian Black.

Owner Jared Thompson attributes the club's success to a combination of the intimate venue and his efforts to educate audiences about how to watch comedy. "The experience for the audience and the comedian has been watered down in large theaters. In some ways, a 'bad seat' at The Comedy Attic is better than a prime seat [in larger venues]," Thompson says. The club also has been a leader in policing shows to prevent heckling and table talk. "Comedians want to keep coming back."

The Comedy Attic has helped propel Bloomington comedians into the national spotlight. The club hosts a weekly open mic night as well as the annual Bloomington Comedy Festival, an 11-week competition for local comedians. Thompson estimates that about 10 Comedy Attic veterans have gone on to headline at national clubs, including Bloomington native Tom Thakkar, who was the city's first comedian to appear on national TV.

123 S. Walnut
comedyattic.com



Local comedian Brad Wilhelm at The Comedy Attic. Photo by Shannon Zahnle

The Fairfax Inn

One of the oldest restaurants near Lake Monroe, The Fairfax Inn is located about 30 minutes south of downtown Bloomington. Open seven days a week, this family-owned, casual-dining establishment offers a menu featuring unpretentious fare ranging from sandwiches and steaks to seafood and pasta, plus daily food and drink specials. The Fairfax Inn also offers a wide variety of entertainment, including live music, trivia, karaoke, and comedy shows, along with pool, beer pong, and cornhole tournaments. An event space is available to rent for private parties.

8660 S. Fairfax Road
fairfaxinn.restaurant



Malibu Grill on the downtown Square. Photo by Rodney Margison

Malibu Grill

Malibu Grill is known for its seafood and steaks, but there's more here than surf and turf. Jon Chickedantz, director of hospitality, describes the menu as "innovative American food," that includes burgers, sandwiches, pizza, pasta, and salads. Vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options are available. "One of our strengths is that our menu is very large, and we've got something for everyone," Chickedantz says.

The same can be said of the Malibu bar, which offers an extensive selection of beer, wine, spirits, and cocktails. There's something special in the bar most nights of the week. Five dollars will get you a Moscow Mule on Monday or a select martini on Wednesday, and on Tuesday evenings, select bottles of wine are only \$12. Thursday the bar features a Bartender's Choice, a drink Chickedantz says their bartender is especially proud of that week. Music lovers can enjoy live jazz piano Wednesday through Friday from 6 to 9 p.m.

106 N. Walnut
malibugrill.net

The Orbit Room

Tucked below Darn Good Soup on the downtown Square, The Orbit Room is the epitome of a dive bar—it's literally underground. With a maximum occupancy of less than 50, this self-proclaimed pub/arcade has frequent live music—everything from sitar to jazz to folk to whatever-is-next—as well as pinball machines to pass the time. The menu is hot dog-centric, but they're exotic dogs, with vegetarian and vegan options. A small but rotating selection of beer and wine rounds things out.

107 N. College



Pinball machines at The Orbit Room. Photo by Cassandra Huskey



Bloomington Blues Jam at the Port Hole Inn. Photo by James Krause

Port Hole Inn

As the oldest live music venue in Monroe County, the Port Hole Inn has been witness to many great performances. "It's a legendary roadhouse," says owner Joel Kohen. "It's got a lot of history." Located in Unionville on the shores of Lake Lemon, the Port Hole opened in 1957. In the more than 60 years since, countless musicians have taken the stage, including some who have gone on to make it big like John Mellencamp, as well as up-and-comers like country artist Jake Dodds of Unionville.

Kohen and his wife, Deena, who bought the bar three years ago, have continued the tradition of live music at the Port Hole, with performances on Friday and Saturday nights in genres ranging from blues to rock to country. The bar also hosts the Bloomington Blues Jam every other Tuesday. "We work really hard to try to promote the local talent," Kohen says.

The Port Hole has a full bar and a wide-ranging menu that includes catfish—a house staple since the beginning, according to Kohen—steaks, ribs, tenderloin, pizza, stromboli, and calzones, in addition to classic pub fare such as burgers and fries. And unlike most nightlife venues, it's a family-friendly establishment, with a separate kids room that offers a view of the stage.

8939 E. South Shore Drive, Unionville
portholeinn.com

The Root Cellar

A subterranean nightclub nestled beneath FARMbloomington, The Root Cellar is the brainchild of FARMbloomington owner Daniel Orr. "I wanted to have this cool kind of man cave space," Orr says. "This was kind of my nightlife fantasy."

Orr describes the space, which is accessible only from the alley behind the restaurant, as a "crazy menagerie of rooms." The eclectic decor features items from his collection of Americana, including mementoes from his family's travels and celebrations as well as a large beer can collection. "It's a place where I can travel back in time but also where people can enjoy the present," Orr says.

Open Tuesday through Saturday from 8 p.m. until late, The Root Cellar hosts live music on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with a mix of local and national acts in a variety of genres. Dave Walter hosts karaoke every Wednesday, and Fridays and Saturdays feature DJs playing everything from disco and punk to house and techno. Both the entire space and individual rooms are available to rent for private events.

108 E. Kirkwood
farm-bloomington.com/root-cellar



A hip-hop performance at The Root Cellar. Photo by Rodney Margison

Serendipity Martini Bar

As its name suggests, Serendipity Martini Bar specializes in that classic concoction of gin and vermouth, serving more than 20 different martinis along with a selection of handcrafted cocktails, wine, and beer. The bar's upscale ambiance makes it ideal for a romantic date or a classy night on the town. "You go to Serendipity to kind of get away from the average college scene," says Mike Oransky, general manager.

But Serendipity is more than a cocktail bar—it's also one of Bloomington's best spots for live music and dancing. Local performers and DJs provide the soundtrack as dance groups such as Ritmos Latinos Indiana, Southern Indiana Kizomba, and Arthur Murray Bloomington host dance lessons, social dancing, and more.

201 S. College
serendipitymartini.com



Serendipity Martini Bar. Photo by Cassandra Huskey

Sweet Grass

Located about five minutes south of downtown, Sweet Grass puts a modern spin on traditional low country and southern-roots dishes, with classics such as shrimp and grits as well as contemporary creations like catfish tacos. Its expansive drink menu features southern-influenced craft cocktails, in addition to wine and beer. There's live music five nights a week, with an open mic on Tuesday, jazz on Wednesday, and performances by local artists Thursday through Saturday.

405 W. Patterson Drive
sweetgrassbtown.com

Switchyard Brewing Company

Switchyard Brewing Company was founded in 2014 by Bloomington residents Kurtis Cummings and Jeff Hall, but it wasn't until 2018 that Switchyard's taproom opened its doors. Housed in the former home of Jake's Nightclub on North Walnut, the all-ages, dog-friendly space serves more than a dozen Switchyard beers, several local ciders, and a selection of wine, in addition to nonalcoholic options such as coffee, tea, and craft sodas. There is no kitchen, but gourmet snacks are available for purchase, and it has a BYOF (bring your own food) policy.

The taproom opens at 8 a.m. Monday through Saturday and at 9 a.m. on Sunday, and is available to the public as a coworking space during the workday. In the evening and on weekends, Switchyard hosts an eclectic mix of events—everything from live music and trivia to euchre tournaments, yoga classes, and BYOV (Bring Your Own Vinyl) nights.

419 N. Walnut
switchyardbrewing.com

Switchyard Brewing Company. Photo by Rodney Margison



A packed house at The Tap. Photo by Cassandra Huskey

The Tap

With more than 65 craft beers on tap and 400-plus bottled beers, The Tap is a beer connoisseur's paradise. This locally owned brewpub produces one of the largest selections of craft beer in the state—nearly 20 of its draft beers are Tap originals, created at its on-site brewery by award-winning brewer Jarrod May.

The Tap's beer selection is complemented by what General Manager Wes Ault calls "elevated pub fare," including burgers, tacos, sandwiches, and pizza.

Open seven days a week, The Tap hosts live entertainment Thursday through Saturday nights. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, team trivia starts at 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights are devoted to live music performed by local artists.

101 N. College
thetapbeerbar.com



THEATERS

Bloomington Playwrights Project

Bloomington Playwrights Project (BPP) is one of the only professional theater companies in the country dedicated exclusively to performing new works. The company's productions range from comedies, dramas, and musicals to innovative entertainment experiences such as performances by mentalists and magicians. "We are on the cutting edge of what theater is," says Chad Rabinovitz, BPP's producing artistic director.

More than 1,000 plays are submitted each year by playwrights who want BPP to premiere their work. Actors Jeff Daniels, Jesse Eisenberg, and Dan Castellana (the voice of Homer Simpson) are among those who have written plays that have debuted at BPP, along with a number of Emmy Award- and Tony Award-winning writers.

And thanks to the willingness of Bloomington audiences to take chances, BPP consistently sells out every performance of every production, season after season. "Bloomington as a cultural community comes and supports it in a big way," Rabinovitz says.

Upcoming BPP productions include the musicals *Lost Letters* (December 16–21) and *The Enlightenment of Percival Von Schmootz* (January 24–February 28).

107 W. 9th St.
newplays.org



King Bee & the Stingers at the Buskirk-Chumley. Photo by Rodney Margison

Buskirk-Chumley Theater

With more than 200 public events each year, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater (BCT) offers "pretty much anything you can imagine happening on a stage or screen," says Executive Director Danielle McClelland.

A Bloomington institution since 1922, the BCT hosts everything from performances by local arts organizations to concerts by nationally known artists. The theater is the primary venue for major events such as the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival, the PRIDE Film Festival, and the Limestone Comedy Festival, and it serves as the main performance space for Cardinal Stage, the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra, and other local groups.

The BCT's diverse offerings also include civic events such as Bloomington's annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration and fundraisers like Dancing with the Celebrities.

"The Buskirk-Chumley provides a whole variety of ways for people to come together in the community," McClelland says. "It is a physical space that initiates contact and connection."

Upcoming events at the BCT include the Cardinal Stage production of the Disney musical *Newsies* (December 12–29), a screening of David Lynch's 1992 film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (January 11), and musical performances by Rebirth Brass Band (January 24), Mat Kearney (February 1), and the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra (February 8).

114 E. Kirkwood
buskirkchumley.org



Rehearsal for a Cardinal Stage production. Photo by Rodney Margison

Cardinal Stage

As the only professional theater company in Bloomington that produces both classic and contemporary works, Cardinal Stage has something for everyone. Founded in 2005, Cardinal is known for its high-quality productions of everything from theatrical mainstays to boundary-pushing new works. Cardinal's annual holiday musical is a Bloomington favorite, and its Cardinal for Kids series brings live theater to young audiences through productions of works for children.

Now entering its 14th season, Cardinal has maintained its reputation for excellence as it has grown into the largest arts organization in Monroe County. Under the leadership of Kate Galvin, who became artistic director in 2017, Cardinal is working to make a name for itself as one of the country's top regional theater companies. "We want to put Cardinal on the map as a vibrant regional theater company with a strong local talent pool," she says.

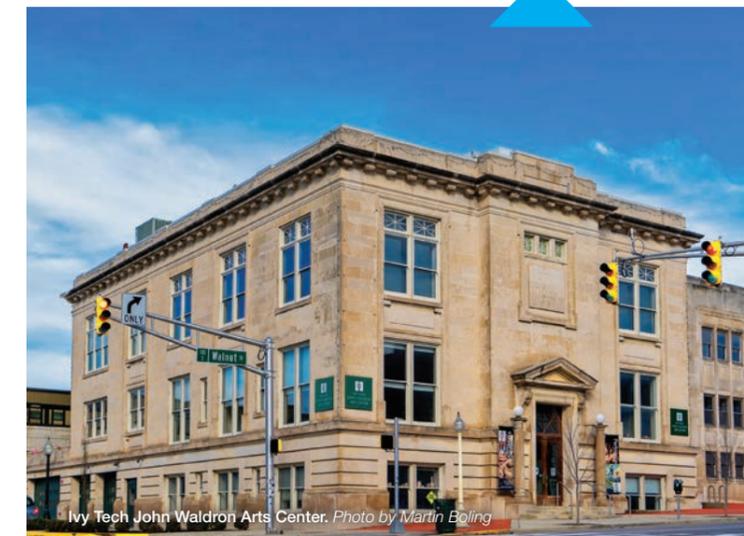
Upcoming Cardinal shows include the Disney musical *Newsies*, December 12–29 at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, and the comedy *The Roommate*, which runs from January 30–February 16 at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center.

cardinalstage.org

Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center

The performing and visual arts get equal billing at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center, which is home to both performance spaces and art galleries. The Whitehart Auditorium and the Rose Firebay host Ivy Tech student productions as well as performances by local arts groups such as Cardinal Stage. The Whitehart Auditorium is a black-box theater typically used for large-scale productions, while the intimate Rose Firebay is suited for smaller events.

122 S. Walnut
ivytech.edu/bloomington/Waldron



Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center. Photo by Martin Bolling



FAR Center for Contemporary Arts. Photo by Rodney Margison

FAR Center for Contemporary Arts

The newest addition to Bloomington's arts scene is the FAR Center for Contemporary Arts, a 5,000-square-foot space located at the corner of 4th and Rogers streets. Martha and David Moore, owners of Bloomington's Pictura Gallery, opened the FAR Center in 2018 with the aim of providing a space for the local creative community to explore interdisciplinary collaboration.

"What we're trying to do is build some bridges so that someone who is interested in theater might come to FAR, maybe even for a theater thing, but then realize that we have the gallery there," says Martha Moore. "The idea is getting people to expand their art experience."

FAR includes gallery space for Pictura, which exhibits contemporary fine art photography, as well as a theater, a library, and a garden, all connected by an open atrium.

202 S. Rogers St.
thefar.org